

Epistemology Moralized:  
David Hume's Practical Epistemology

Among contemporary philosophers, even those who have not found skepticism about empirical science at all compelling have tended to find skepticism about morality irresistible.

- Peter Railton<sup>1</sup>

Railton's remark is accurate; contemporary philosophers almost invariably suppose that morality is more vulnerable than empirical science to scepticism. Yet David Hume apparently embraces an inversion of this twentieth century orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> In book I of the *Treatise*, he claims that the understanding, when it reflects upon itself, "entirely subverts itself" (T 1. 4.7.7; SBN 267) while, in contrast, in book III he claims that our moral faculty, when reflecting upon itself, acquires "new force" (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619). Such passages suggest Hume's view is that morality's claims on us are justified, whereas the understanding's claims are not -- that scepticism about empirical science, but not morality, is irresistible. However, this interpretation does not accurately reflect Hume's position. Indeed, any interpretation which has Hume concluding that the understanding's claims on us are not justified faces an obvious worry - it makes nonsense of the rest of his naturalistic project, including, but not limited to, his description and justification of our moral faculty. For in defending his account of our moral faculty and, perhaps more clearly, in arguing against those who believe in miracles, Hume inescapably presupposes that the understanding's claims on us are in some sense justified. In light of Hume's meticulous and enthusiastic pursuit of his larger naturalistic project, one might even be tempted to conclude that Hume never really thought his sceptical arguments were sound. It would, however, be a mistake to submit to this temptation -- to do so would be to ignore the last part of book I of the *Treatise*, in which Hume evidently does find such arguments to be sound. Hume is undeniably impressed by scepticism about the

understanding, even though this scepticism appears to be in tension with the rest of his naturalistic project.

There are three main ways of dealing with this apparent tension. I call these the "involuntarist," the "reductio," and the "practical," readings. The involuntarist reading emphasizes Hume's insistence that we cannot help but have certain beliefs, no matter how impressed we may be with sceptical arguments while in the study. Hume does pretty clearly think sceptical arguments cannot really phase us once we leave the study, so there is considerably textual evidence for the involuntarist reading. Moreover, the involuntarist reading seems quite promising as a way to dissolve the apparent tension in his view. After all, if we cannot help but rely upon the understanding, it would be at best very odd, and at worst incoherent, to worry about whether we should refrain from relying upon it, since 'ought' implies 'can'. Christine Korsgaard's interpretation is in the spirit of this approach.

The reductio reading holds that Hume distinguishes two radically different conceptions of our cognitive faculties - the rationalist conception and his own. On this reading, Hume's sceptical arguments are offered in service of a reductio of the rationalist conception of the understanding, and not Hume's own conception. If this interpretation is right then Hume never really thought that the understanding, *as we should conceive it*, was subject to sceptical worries in the first place. Hence Hume could happily go on to rely upon the understanding as it should be conceived in carrying out the rest of his naturalistic project. The fact that the discredited rationalist conception of the understanding is vulnerable to devastating sceptical attacks would be irrelevant to the rest of his project. Annette Baier and Barbara Winters have defended the reductio reading.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the practical reading maintains that while Hume defends the understanding, his defense is a practical one. The understanding's claims are justified, not because we can theoretically determine their correspondence to reality, but because relying on them is practically sensible. The end of book I, in which Hume seems to

embrace a practical antidote to his sceptical angst, supports this reading. By explaining how the understanding's claims are, in the end, justified, this account also dissolves the apparent tension in Hume's view. There are, however, serious problems facing anyone who advances this sort of interpretation. First, as it is typically characterized, the interpretation is surprisingly vague, gesturing faintly toward the utility (or perhaps expected utility) of relying upon the understanding. The result is that the practical reading is typically understood in a very sparse, inchoate way.

The second, and even more daunting, problem facing the practical reading surfaces most vividly when one reflects upon the way in which Hume needs to defend the understanding on two fronts. Hume aims to defend our putting faith in the understanding against all the relevant alternatives, and all the relevant alternatives include *both* putting one's faith in nothing *and* putting one's faith in something other than the understanding. Indeed, these seem to be all the relevant alternatives. So on the one hand, he must give some account of why we should not succumb to Pyrrhonian scepticism, putting our faith in nothing. Prima facie, the practical reading provides Hume with an adequate defense of the understanding on this front. However, submitting to scepticism is not the only way one might reject the understanding. One might instead put one's faith in something other than the understanding. For example, one might favor reliance on religious revelation. Hume was in fact keen to refute religious enthusiasts, so I shall focus on this case even though religious revelation is only one of many epistemic bedrocks that one might favor against the understanding. The problem is that Hume's defense of the understanding does not seem to be successful on this second front. Hume's practical argument in favor of relying upon the understanding, as deployed against opponents who favor, say religious revelation over the understanding, seems to beg the question. In arguing, for example, that relying upon the understanding will have good consequences, Hume seems to be presupposing the understanding's reliability, for he seems to tacitly rely upon the understanding to predict the consequences of relying upon it. Oddly, in spite of the

significance of this problem, existing discussions ignore it. As I shall argue, however, Hume was alive to this problem, even if he never fully resolved it.

In spite of these two rather serious problems, I favor a version of the practical interpretation. With regard to the first problem, I argue that Hume's actual account, is neither sparse nor inchoate. Defenders of the practical reading have neglected the degree to which Hume's practical defense of the understanding strictly fits with his moral theory. In book III, Hume recognizes four kinds of moral justification, arguing that a character trait can be virtuous for any one of the following four reasons: (a) the trait is useful to its possessor, or (b) the trait is useful to others (in the possessor's "narrow circle"), or (c) the trait is immediately agreeable to its possessor, or (d) the trait is immediately agreeable to others (in the possessor's "narrow circle"). Strikingly, at the end of book I, Hume mobilizes *each* of these four kinds of justifications for relying on the understanding.

Moreover, that Hume deploys each of these kinds of justification, and, in particular, that he defends the disposition to rely upon the understanding on the grounds that doing so is immediately agreeable to its possessor, provides the key to solving the second problem facing the practical reading - the problem of seeming to beg the question against someone who urges putting one's epistemic faith in something other than the understanding. A crucial element in Hume's solution to the second problem consists in the fact that part of the justification of relying upon the understanding is that doing so is immediately agreeable to its possessor. Combined with Hume's view that we can have veridical introspective access to our passions *unmediated by the understanding*, this premise gives us the resources to defend the practical interpretation against the objection that he begs the question against the religious enthusiast. For this reason, I claim that the way in which Hume deploys *each* of his four kinds of moral justification for relying upon the understanding, and in particular, that he deploys the "immediately-agreeable-to-its-possessor" type, is crucial to addressing what I take to be the deepest problem with any version of the practical reading.

I begin by presenting in more detail the apparent tension in Hume's view (in section I). I then reconstruct the involuntarist reading and show why it does not mitigate this apparent tension (in section II). In the case of the *reductio* reading, by contrast, I allow that the reading, if correct, would mitigate the apparent tension, but argue that it cannot be the right reading of Hume (in section III). This leaves the practical reading as the only live candidate for a plausible reading of Hume that can dissolve the seeming tension in his view. With this in mind, I present and defend the practical reading of Hume's justification of the understanding as Hume's attempt to ameliorate this apparent tension, showing how Hume mobilizes each of the four kinds of moral argument he recognizes as legitimate in book III in defense of the understanding (in section IV). Finally, I consider the objection that Hume begs the question against, for example, a religious enthusiast who viewed the understanding with contempt and favored aligning her beliefs with religious authority (in section V). I then show how the more refined understanding of Hume's practical argument provides Hume with the resources to mount an interesting reply to this objection.

## I.

"Sir, I have found you an argument, but I am not obliged to find you an understanding."  
-Dr. Samuel Johnson

At the end of book I, Hume concludes that the understanding, when it acts alone, "entirely subverts itself" (T 7.4.7.7; SBN 267) and we must begin by determining the content of this claim. Once we are clear about what it is for the understanding to subvert itself, we will both have a clearer picture of the apparent tension in Hume's overall view and be in a better position to see how that apparent tension might be resolved. To determine the content of Hume's claim, we should first see what he means by the understanding.

Hume often he uses 'reason' to refer to reason in a strict sense - the mental faculty that discerns relations of ideas.<sup>4</sup> As a natural complement to this usage, he frequently uses 'the understanding' to refer to the mental faculty that judges matters of fact.

However, he sometimes also uses 'the understanding' to refer to both of these faculties, as when he remarks that, "the operations of the human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of the ideas, and the inferring of matter of fact." (T 3.1.1.18; SBN 463) For present purposes, the issue is Hume's meaning at the end of book I, where he claims that the understanding, when it acts alone, "entirely subverts itself." (T 7.4.7.7; SBN 267) In claiming the understanding cannot bear its own survey, Hume refers to "Of scepticism with regard to reason," where he claims to have "already shewn" that the understanding subverts itself.<sup>5</sup> So the best way to determine what is meant by 'the understanding' in the understanding-subverts-itself thesis is to determine what it must mean for the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" to make sense.

The argument comes in two stages. The first is to argue that "all knowledge degenerates into probability." Even though the rules are "certain and infallible" in the demonstrative sciences, we are fallible, and when we apply those rules, we are "very apt" to err. The second stage is to argue that the initial probability that we have not made an error, no matter how vast, must be reduced to nothing, insofar as we successively apply the principles of the understanding. For we ought to correct our first judgment, "deriv'd from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding." (T 1.4.1.5; SBN 182) Roughly, we should weaken our confidence in any judgment in proportion to the unreliability of the faculty that gives rise to it. This is supposed to generate an infinite regress, as the second judgment is subject to a "doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties," and so on. So insofar as one is determined by the principles of the understanding, one's confidence in any judgment will be diminished until it is reduced "to nothing." (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 182)<sup>6</sup>

The force of the second stage of this argument is that *all* probability is reduced by the understanding to nothing. Both the deliverances of a priori and of a posteriori reasoning fall within the argument's scope. Moreover, Hume knows this; he concludes

that his argument "leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life." (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267-268) Indeed, that this argument is meant to destroy the results of *all* our reasoning explains why Hume is especially troubled by it, and later singles it out for special attention. So the understanding that is subverted includes both demonstrative reason and empirical reason.<sup>7</sup>

What is it, though, for the understanding, so conceived, to subvert itself, and why should we care whether it does so? Following Christine Korsgaard and Annette Baier, I assume that Hume reasonably thought that whether the understanding endorses itself as reliable is relevant to whether its claims upon us are justified.<sup>8</sup> The basic thought is that if the understanding does find itself reliable and endorses itself on this basis, this speaks in favor of supposing its claims upon us to be justified. If instead the understanding finds itself unreliable then this would speak in favor of supposing its claims upon us are not justified. One might, following Korsgaard, even go so far as to think that the *only* place one could turn in trying to justify the understanding's claims is the understanding itself. For it might seem that one cannot take reality unmediated by one's understanding of it and compare it with the picture of reality that one's understanding delivers. Furthermore, whether the understanding endorses itself is not, as it might seem, a trivial question, analogous to asking an ambitious politician whether he deserves to be elected. Indeed, Hume's sceptical arguments illustrate vividly how easy it might be for the understanding not to endorse of itself.

Having gotten a clearer picture of what it is for the understanding to subvert itself, and why it matters whether it does subvert itself, we are now in a position to see the apparent tension in Hume's view. When the understanding, including both demonstrative and empirical faculties of reasoning, takes itself as an input, it is unable to determine itself reliable, and hence subverts itself. It seems as if Hume must therefore conclude that the understanding's claims upon us are *in no sense* justified. That Hume does feel forced to draw this conclusion is independently confirmed by the despairing remarks we find at

the end of book I, where he complains, for example, of having to choose between "a false reason and none at all." (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268)

However, if Hume does not think the understanding's claims upon us are in any sense justified, he will have made nonsense of the rest of his naturalistic project. It would make nonsense, for example, of Hume's conclusion in book III that our moral faculty approves of itself upon reflection - in Korsgaard's terms, that our moral faculty "passes the reflexivity test." For when morality examines its content and origins to see if it can approve of itself, it must enlist the aid of the understanding to get an accurate picture of its content and origins. If, however, the understanding's claims on us are not justified, then this exercise could have no force. It would be as if Hume has nothing to say to someone who responded to book III by rejecting his account of the origin of our moral faculty, instead embracing whatever story suited her fancy, e.g., that our moral faculty came from ghouls. For if Hume tried to show such a person that she should favor his account over her own, he would do so by appealing (tacitly) to her understanding, and she could note that in doing so he is assuming that the understanding's claims are justified. This interpretation also makes Hume's motivation for attempting to establish his account of our moral practices "on pure reason" (T 3.2.8.8; SBN 546) completely mysterious.

Moreover, apart from devastating whatever force his justification of morality is meant to have, Hume's thinking that the understanding's claims upon us are in no way justified would also make his larger *descriptive* project hopeless. Hume intends to give an account of human nature that is at least loosely modeled upon Newton's approach to the physical sciences. He thinks it important that in carrying out this project we are very careful in our reasoning, meticulously following the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" (T 1.3.15.1; SBN 173).<sup>9</sup> If, however, the understanding's claims upon us were in no sense justified, it would be hard to see why Hume placed such importance in being so meticulous. Further, it would be especially hard to see how he could consistently attack "the vulgar" for their credulity as he does in "Of Miracles" and make



such claims as the "wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." (EHU 10.4; SBN110)<sup>10</sup> There appears to be a deep tension in Hume's view. Indeed, the apparent tension is so deep and glaring that charitable interpretation requires finding a way of dissolving or at least mitigating it.<sup>11</sup>

## II.

"There is no good in arguing with the inevitable."

- James Russell Lowell

Hume frequently reminds us that he does not intend to convince us of the outlandish conclusions of his sceptical arguments.<sup>12</sup> These reminders suggest a strategy for resolving the apparent tension in Hume's view. Throughout book I, Hume's motivation for pursuing sceptical arguments is a psychological, and not an epistemological, one; he aims to prove that our beliefs are determined not by the understanding, as the rationalists would have it, but by the fancy. He argues that *if* our beliefs were determined by the understanding alone, we would "terminate in a total suspense of judgment." (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 184) Fortunately, nature takes a hand, and we are determined uncontrollably by the fancy to accept certain propositions. Hume can allow that the understanding, if it were to act alone and from its most general principles, would entirely subvert itself, and maintain that this does not pose a real threat to our understanding because it never actually acts "*alone* and from its most general principles" - the understanding is always supplemented and kept in check by some operation of the fancy. Hence, we seem able to reconcile Hume's claim that the understanding, when it acts alone entirely subverts itself with the rest of his naturalistic project. The fact that the understanding when acting alone would entirely subvert itself does not imply that we are unjustified in relying upon the understanding in pursuing a theory of human nature, for the simple reason that we cannot help but rely upon it. This is the involuntarist reading.

Hume seems to be a thorough determinist and a compatibilist about free will, so one might at this point insist that the involuntarist reading is mistaken simply because

Hume does not think that the fact that we cannot but do something precludes legitimate moral evaluation.<sup>13</sup> However we understand Hume's compatibilism, though, he does seem to assume that in some sense of 'can' that 'ought' implies 'can'. The crucial point must be that the relevant sense of 'can' is not one according to which 'was causally determined to p' entails 'can not but p'. This is not the place to discuss the various different interpretations of 'can' Hume might have in mind. The point is simply that good textual evidence suggests that he does endorse the 'ought' implies 'can' principle in some form or another. Here is a particularly clear example: "They extend not beyond a mistake of *fact*, which moralists have not generally suppos'd criminal, as being perfectly involuntary." (T 3.1.1.12; SBN 459) Since in the context it is fairly clear that Hume endorses this general supposition of moralists, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hume would be willing to infer that something is not morally damnable if it was involuntary in some sense of 'involuntary'. So the involuntarist interpretation cannot be dismissed this easily.

One problem with the involuntarist reading is that all Hume's argument establishes is that we cannot avoid embracing *some* beliefs and making *some* causal inferences. It does not establish that we cannot avoid following the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" or proportioning our beliefs to the evidence.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it would be perverse to interpret Hume as even trying to establish this result, as it is obviously false. As Hume is well aware, people frequently depart from the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" and are *inappropriately* influenced by such maxims as "a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity." (T 1.3.8.7; SBN 146) Hume explicitly argues that the rules by which to judge of causes and effects are "extremely difficult in their application."<sup>15</sup> Far from being impossible, our departing from Hume's quasi-Newtonian approach to the "science of man" is all too easy. The question remains, given the sceptical arguments of book I, why should we make an effort to conform to that approach? Indeed, given the force of those arguments, why should we not instead rely

upon tradition, superstition, and even religious enthusiasm to determine our beliefs, instead of the understanding? That we cannot help but make *some* causal inferences does not provide any adequate answer to this inescapable question.

Moreover, even *if* we not only could not help but reason, but could not help but reason in the ways commonly taken to be correct, the question of how we should view this feature of our psychology would so far remain open for Hume. Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson, who put great faith in Providence, Hume is unwilling to infer that something is worth esteeming from its being natural. Indeed, he argues at length that such an inference is invalid (see T 3.1.2.10; SBN 475).<sup>16</sup> So even if, when nature took a hand and forced us to reason, she typically forces us to reason in ways that common sense endorses as valid, this could not, in itself, justify Hume's vigorous endorsement of our so reasoning.

Perhaps there is a more promising way of characterizing the involuntarist reading. Korsgaard makes some remarks that are suggestive of such a characterization:

When we reason about reasoning itself, Hume thinks that we will lose confidence in it, and this loss of confidence subverts our confidence in any other piece of abstract reasoning. But beliefs about common life are, so to speak, *hardier*, because of their connection to perception and to ideas which for us are forceful and vivacious. The reasoning that leads us to scepticism is itself an abstract piece of reasoning and cannot successfully oppose these more vivacious thoughts. We can only remain sceptical about beliefs in common life so long as we keep the sceptical arguments before our minds, which we cannot do while we are thinking about common life. Scepticism about metaphysical beliefs is more enduring.<sup>17</sup>

The idea seems to be that while reason may fail reflexivity, and hence (in Korsgaard's terms) lack normativity, when it comes to our beliefs about common life this scepticism has no bite. Once we actually think about common life, our scepticism evaporates. Hence Korsgaard can urge that nobody can really allow her sceptical reflections to infect her beliefs about common life. She might argue on Hume's behalf that even though the understanding fails reflexivity and is therefore not normative, still, we cannot help but trust the understanding in our reasonings about common life. The reply would conclude

by claiming that our reflections on the origin and content of morality are reflections about common life, and so these reflections are not threatened by scepticism about the understanding; such scepticism only undermines our faith in abstract reasoning.

In spite of the distinction Korsgaard draws, her view still falls prey to the main worry already pressed against any such account - in the common life we can just as easily rely upon superstition, hasty overgeneralizations, etc., as we can rely upon the understanding. Hume is anxious to argue that we should, for example, proportion our beliefs to the evidence, and not depart from the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects," the articulation of which he devotes an entire section of the *Treatise*. The involuntarist cannot plausibly argue that we cannot help but consistently proportion our beliefs to the evidence and follow the appropriate rules of reasoning. At most, the involuntarist can establish that there are certain beliefs and inferences we cannot avoid, once we leave the study. This modest result, however, will not help Hume mount an effective reply to the religious enthusiast, who while making those inferences we cannot help but make and believing those things we cannot help but believe, nonetheless grossly departs from the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" and self-consciously does not proportion his beliefs to the evidence. *This* is the crucial problem with any version of the involuntarist response, Korsgaard's included.

In addition, though, Korsgaard's interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of Hume's remarks about the common life. Hume does suggest that the deficiency in our ideas that vexes him in book I, "is not, indeed, perceiv'd in the common life." (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267) He also famously observes that his sceptical worries vanish when he dines and plays back-gammon. Korsgaard infers from such observations that Hume thought we cannot keep sceptical arguments before our mind when we are *thinking about* the common life. This, however, is an unwarranted inference. All Hume actually says is that when he *engages in* the common life he is unable to keep such arguments before his mind. He says the deficiency of our reasoning is not "perceiv'd *in* the common life," *not*

that it is not perceiv'd in our *thinking about* the common life. His examples of this phenomenon are examples of actually engaging in the common life (playing backgammon, etc.), *not* examples of thinking about the common life. Indeed, Hume's discussion of his angst at the end of book I makes it apparent that we can keep such sceptical reflections before our mind when thinking about the common life, since he himself does so, noting that he is "ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what conditions shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread?" (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 269)<sup>18</sup> Here we find Hume asking questions about the common life - where he is, what his origin is, whose favor he should court, and *simultaneously* feeling the bite of scepticism. So Korsgaard's reading rests on an inaccurate interpretation of the end of book I.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, aside from conflating engaging in the common life with thinking about the common life, Korsgaard's approach also suffers the more general problem already isolated for any version of the involuntarist reading. Any approach of this sort ultimately fails for the simple reason that we can all too easily make hasty overgeneralizations, rely upon superstition, etc. In the context of responding to someone who wonders why we should not, e.g., rely upon superstition, pointing out that we cannot help having certain beliefs and making certain inferences is simply a non-sequitur. Since Hume nonetheless condemns such non-rational practices as leading to "such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become ashamed of our credulity," (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267) there still seems to be a fundamental tension in his view.

### III.

"How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us."  
- William Shakespeare

Hume was keen to debunk the rationalist view that our beliefs should always be fully determined by reason, and the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason," if

sound, would serve as a plausible reductio of the rationalist view, since that argument is meant to show that if we follow the rationalist's advice, we would end up with no beliefs at all! So Hume should be read as attacking rationalism with a reductio, and in particular a reductio of the claim that our beliefs should always be fully determined by reason.

Some commentators, such as Annette Baier and Barbara Winters, have read Hume as pressing a different reductio against the rationalists.<sup>20</sup> They see Hume as distinguishing the understanding as the rationalists conceive it from the understanding as it really should be conceived, and as offering a reductio of the rationalist conception of the understanding. On this interpretation, we can easily dissolve the apparent tension in Hume's overall view. According to Baier and Winters, when Hume says that the understanding, when it acts alone and from its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, he is *only* talking about the understanding as the rationalists conceive it. By contrast, the reductio reading holds Hume's view to be that the understanding, properly understood, does not subvert itself. The crucial idea is that Hume's own conception of the understanding is as a less sterile faculty which is lively and mixes with the passions, and that this somehow makes it immune from the sort of self-subversion to which the understanding as the rationalists conceived it is so vulnerable. Hence Hume may rely upon the understanding, so conceived, in pursuing his project of defending a "science of man" against his critics. Hume may happily conclude that the understanding conceived as the rationalists conceived it, makes no claims on us that are justified, so long as the understanding as it should be conceived does make claims on us that are justified. Baier and Winters presumably would argue that we would suppose there is any tension in Hume's overall view only by equivocating between two senses of 'the understanding'.

If correct, the reductio reading would dissolve the seeming tension in Hume's view. However, four considerations tell against this interpretation. First, one would have simply expected Hume to have been more explicit about it if this was what he was doing. Although Hume is maddening in his tendency to switch back and forth between different

senses of 'reason' and 'the understanding' without warning, I take it that those are all senses that he accepts as picking out mental faculties that we actually have. This sort of sloppiness is much less serious than the sort of sloppiness Hume would be guilty of on the reductio reading. On that reading he would be switching back and forth without warning between a sense of 'reason' he wants to reject altogether and a sense of 'reason' that he accepts. Hume is generally *not* sloppy in this way; he identifies his target and sharply distinguishes it from his own view.<sup>21</sup>

Second, there is the problem of articulating just what the distinction is supposed to be between the rationalist conception of reason and Hume's own conception. The most natural suggestion, and the one that Baier seems to embrace, is the rationalist conception of reason is as a purely deductive mode of reasoning, whereas Hume's own conception includes inductive reasoning, which he assimilates sometimes to custom and habit, and sometimes to the most general principles of the imagination. The problem with this way of drawing the distinction, is that the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason," with which Hume is especially impressed, is clearly aimed at the understanding in the more inclusive sense. Thus, we cannot simply distinguish the reason of the rationalists as deductive reason, since Hume's scepticism is clearly aimed not only at deductive reason, but at inductive reasoning as well. Moreover, the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason," *if* sound, would vitiate the understanding on any plausible construal of the understanding's nature. For that argument aims to show that any proposition, no matter how it was arrived at and no matter how certain it may seem at first, can be seen upon further reflection to be completely unfounded. So there is no obvious way to draw the distinction between rationalist reason and Humean reason that will sit comfortably both with the reductio reading and the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason."<sup>22</sup>

Third, if the reductio reading were correct, one would have thought that Hume would have carefully laid out his own conception of reason and contrasted it with the discredited, rationalist one. Further, one would have expected him to lay out a new

conception *both* of inductive and deductive reasoning, since his argument is apparently meant to devastate the rationalist conception of both. However, Hume never does this. With regard to inductive reasoning, he does lay out his "Rules of which to judge of causes and effects," but these are hardly principles with which the rationalists would have taken issue, nor are they intended to be particularly novel.<sup>23</sup> With regard to deductive reasoning, Owen seems right to remark that, "it must be admitted that Hume nowhere presents his own theory of demonstrative reasoning as being significantly new, and standing in contrast to a discredited earlier version."<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, the *reductio* reading makes Hume's extreme melancholy in the first half of "Conclusion of this book" incomprehensible. In that part of the *Treatise*, Hume very clearly departs from his more usual style, and waxes passionately about how upset his reflections upon the frailty of the human understanding have made him. If he had simply been attacking a conception of the understanding that he intended all along to replace with his own, then this passionate concern would be completely unmotivated. If all he had done in pressing his sceptical worries was discredit the rationalist conception of reason, knowing all the while that his own conception was perfectly sound, why should he feel, "like a man, who having struck many shoals...has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten-vessel" (T 1.4.7.1; SBN 263)? On the *reductio* reading, Hume would instead see himself as exchanging that weather-beaten vessel for his own, new and improved, shiny yacht! Just after remarking that the "memory, senses, and understanding are, all of them founded on the imagination" he goes on to say that it is "no wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious shou'd lead us into errors." (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 265) Surely the understanding that is "founded on the imagination" is Hume's own conception of the understanding - what rationalist would allow that the understanding is "founded on the imagination?" However, this very conception is a conception of the understanding that is "so inconstant and fallacious" and leads us into error. Perhaps most famously, Hume goes on to remark that we have "no



choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all." (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268) This claim is difficult to fit into the reductio reading; on that reading Hume should have said we can choose between a false reason - that of the rationalists, and a true one - his own. Of course, we might try to save the reductio interpretation by seeing Hume as lumping both his own conception of reason and the rationalist one under the heading "false reason." In this case, however, we must see Hume's own conception of reason as being a sort of false reason, with which he is deeply unsatisfied. Hence the seeming tension in Hume's overall view will remain; what force can the rest of his naturalist project have for someone who is sceptical of it, given that it is based on a kind of "false reason"? This would eliminate a major attraction of the reductio reading - its ability to eliminate the seeming tension in Hume's view.<sup>25</sup>

These four considerations substantially undermine the reductio reading. Hume *is* launching a reductio against the rationalist advice to believe only what reason alone determines one to believe; he is explicit about that. He is not, however, launching a reductio against some distinctively rationalist conception of what reason is, in favor of his own. Hume's scepticism ran deep, threatening the understanding on any plausible conception, and so jeopardizing his larger project. The melancholy tone of the first half of "Conclusion of this book" was not without good cause.

#### **IV.**

"Nor could we ever reverse the order and expect practical reason to submit to speculative reason, because every interest is ultimately practical, even that of speculative reason being only conditional upon reaching perfection only in practical use."

- Immanuel Kant

The key to dissolving the apparent tension in Hume's view is *not* to distinguish two different conceptions of the understanding. Rather, the crucial move is to distinguish two different modes of justification. One mode of justification is the theoretical mode, whereby we try to justify the understanding's claims by showing that the understanding certifies itself. We reason about our faculties of reasoning and try to determine whether

we ought to rely upon them because they are reliable. This is the sort of justification of the understanding that Hume's sceptical arguments are intended to devastate. It remains an open question whether there is another kind of justification of relying upon the understanding that we can have. In particular, it remains to be seen whether the understanding cannot be given a *practical* justification. This is important because a crucial element of the apparent tension in Hume's view is the assumption that he concludes that the understanding's claims upon us are in *no sense* justified. If those claims could be given a practical, if not a theoretical, justification, then this apparent tension in Hume's view would turn out to be merely apparent. If this were Hume's view, then, somewhat surprisingly, he would endorse Kant's claim that speculative reason ultimately must answer to practical reason. Moreover, the practical reading also fits nicely with the melancholy tone of the end of book I, since it would have been considerably more satisfying if the understanding could have been given a speculative, as well as a practical, justification. There is something deeply unsatisfying and unsettling about the sceptical arguments about book I, even if there are good practical reasons to rely upon the understanding in spite of those arguments.

It is worth pausing to see both what the practical reading and the reductio reading may have in common, and what separates them. On the reductio reading, Hume first launches a "*reductio ad absurdum* of Cartesian intellect," and then goes on to develop "its more passionate and sociable successor."<sup>26</sup> My suggestion, instead is that Hume first shows the impossibility of giving a theoretical justification of the understanding, on *any* plausible conception of the understanding, but then goes on to give a practical justification of *that very faculty*. It turns out that the practical justification does appeal to our "more passionate and sociable" nature. Baier and I are in agreement that Hume's antidote to his sceptical angst essentially involves appeal to our passions and sociability. Indeed, Baier herself goes to some length to illustrate the importance of Hume's treatment of the intellectual virtues.<sup>27</sup> We disagree in that I see this appeal as invoking a different

kind of justification of the same old faculty, the understanding, whereas she sees it as a recharacterization of the understanding itself.

At the end of book I, Hume argues at some length that the understanding can be given a practical justification, which is just where one would expect him so to argue, since at this point the apparent tension in his overall view is depressingly pronounced. He has just finished giving a battery of impressive sceptical arguments, and is about to embark upon the rest of his naturalistic project, the point of which seems to have been undermined by those very arguments. It has of course been suggested before that Hume's epistemology is ultimately pragmatic, but previous interpreters have, I think, underestimated the extensive textual evidence for this interpretation. More importantly, those who have so far defended this interpretation have been disappointingly vague about the sense in which Hume gives a practical justification of relying on the understanding. In fact, Hume gives us a pragmatic epistemology which is quite specific and fine-grained. The considerations Hume mobilizes at the end of book I show that his justification is, in his very broad sense, a moral one that fits strictly with the moral theory we are given in book III. Indeed, in book III, Hume identifies four possible kinds of moral justification, and at the end of book I we find him employing *each* of these four kinds of moral justification of our being disposed to rely upon the understanding.<sup>28</sup>

There is ample textual evidence for the interpretation I am proposing. For Hume, a character trait, such as being disposed consistently to employ and rely upon the understanding, counts as virtuous insofar as it "gives pleasure by the mere survey" when surveyed from a "common point of view." (T 3.3.1.30; SBN 591) Hume isolates four ways in which character trait garner our approval from a common point of view, and hence count as virtuous: (a) by being immediately agreeable to its possessor, (b) by being immediately agreeable to others [in the "narrow circle" of its possessor], (c) by being useful to its possessor, (d) by being useful to others [in the "narrow circle" of its

possessor] (see, for example, T 3.3.1.28-31; SBN 590-591). Perhaps surprisingly, this central element of Hume's moral theory is essential to understanding his epistemology.

For Hume, character traits are virtuous or vicious in the first instance; actions only count as virtuous or vicious "as a sign of some quality or character." (T 3.3.1.4; SBN 575) So if Hume is making a moral argument in "Conclusion of this book" it must be an argument in favor of some character trait. Hume does explicitly sing the praises of "submitting to" his "senses and understanding" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269) at least where "reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) and I take it that for present purposes this is an adequate characterization of the durable principle of mind he aims to defend. It should, however, be noted that in book III, Hume's discussion of intellectual virtues is considerably more fine-grained than this, speaking of the importance of "a clear head," "copious invention," "sure judgment," and other specific aspects of "character, or peculiar understanding." (T 3.3.4.6; SBN 610)<sup>29</sup>

We should examine in turn each of the four ways in which Hume defends the virtuousness of this character trait. Hume is most clear and insistent upon how the disposition to rely upon the understanding is immediately agreeable to its possessor.<sup>30</sup> Hume's idea is that whereas relying upon the understanding is immediately pleasing and agreeable, resisting the natural inclination to do so in light of sceptical worries tends to be painful and immediately disagreeable. Hence a disposition to rely upon the understanding, and put aside one's sceptical worries and see the understanding as a reasonably reliable method for finding the truth, turns out to be virtuous because it is a disposition which is agreeable to its possessor. For example, Hume tells the reader that he is "naturally *inclin'd*" to carry his view to those subjects about which he has "met with so many disputes in the course of" his reading and conversation. Dining and backgammon are fine as distractions, but Hume eventually finds himself naturally inclined to return to his philosophical work. This claim comes in the context of Hume's attempt to justify his not being stymied by his own scepticism, so it would seem that his

being naturally inclined to return to philosophical inquiry is doing some justificatory work. The suggestion is that careful reasoning, in this case even on abstract philosophical questions, is immediately agreeable, insofar as acting upon one's natural inclinations is immediately agreeable. Even more clearly, Hume concludes this paragraph by remarking that, "these sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy." (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271)<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Hume also claims that where "reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to." (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) Here Hume indicates that the primary justification for "assenting to" reason is that it is agreeable to do so; we should only assent to it when it "is lively" and "mixes itself with some propensity." Where it does not, Hume goes on to tell us, "it can never have any title to operate upon us." (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) Indeed, Hume is uncharacteristically explicit in this passage that he is making a normative, and not a descriptive, claim, as he speaks of when reason "ought to" be assented to and when it has no "title" to operate upon us.<sup>32</sup> It is quite natural to understand Hume's discussion here of mixing with a propensity as referring to mixing with an inclination to do what we find pleasant and his discussion of liveliness as referring to the pleasure we take in using reason. There may well be other ways of reading this passage, but in the context of Hume's concern not to be a "loser in point of pleasure" the hedonistic reading seems reasonable enough.<sup>33</sup>

Having seen how Hume argues in favor of being disposed to rely upon the understanding in virtue of the immediate agreeableness of doing so, we should now turn to the remaining three kinds of moral arguments he gives for that conclusion. Consider the "agreeable-to-others" kind of argument. Hume also employs this kind of argument in favor of being disposed to rely upon the understanding. Actually, in book I, he primarily argues that one alternative to being stymied by skepticism is immediately disagreeable, which is not really to argue that being disposed to rely on the understanding is itself a

virtue, but to argue that the alternative to being so disposed is a vice. Near the beginning of "Conclusion of this book" Hume sadly reflects upon how incredibly disagreeable he would seem to others, were he to persist in being so moved by his sceptical worries while in their company. He calls to others for "shelter and warmth" but "no one will hearken to" him; everyone "keeps at a distance" because they dread "that storm" which beats upon him "from every side." Hume is keenly aware that being in the company of someone whose sceptical worries make them so melancholy as to be tempted to "reject all belief and reasoning" would be an unpleasant affair. It would seem that one advantage of submitting to one's understanding only when it mixes with some propensity, would be that the alternative of being stymied by scepticism is immediately disagreeable to others. Given Hume's account of sympathy, this is a plausible line for him to take. Being around someone whose brain is "so heated" as to feel rocked by a storm cannot be very pleasant, given our tendency to sympathize, in Humean fashion, with others.<sup>34</sup> However, Hume not only argues that the sceptic's character is immediately disagreeable; he also argues more positively that the philosopher's character is immediately agreeable, though not so explicitly in book I.<sup>35</sup> In book II, for example, when discussing curiosity, he argues that,

The first and most considerable circumstance requisite to render truth agreeable, is the genius and capacity, which is employ'd in its invention and discovery. What is easy and obvious is never valu'd; and even what is *in itself* difficult, if we come to the knowledge of it without difficulty, and without any stretch of thought or judgment, is but little regarded. We love to trace the demonstrations of mathematicians; but shou'd receive small entertainment from a person, who shou'd barely inform us of the propositions of liens and angles, tho' we repos'd the utmost confidence in his judgment and veracity. (T 2.3.10.3; SBN 449)

Hume is not satisfied to have shown that a disposition to rely upon one's understanding is agreeable both to its possessor and to others; he also argues that it is useful both to its possessor and others. Just after remarking that he is under no obligation to make such "an abuse of time" as he would if he were to "strive against the current of nature," he goes on to ask rhetorically, "what *end can it serve* either for the service of

mankind, or for my own private interest?" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270, emphasis mine) Here we see Hume arguing that submitting to the understanding is useful both to its possessor and to others, whereas giving way to sceptical doubts can serve no end either for its possessor or for "the service of mankind." We have already seen from the introduction to the *Treatise* how important Hume deems it that we get an accurate picture of human nature; hence we have some reason to be as careful as we can in trying to get such an accurate picture. It is, in other words, relatively obvious how a reliance upon the understanding might be useful, both to its possessor and others; it might allow us to further our knowledge of human nature, and all sorts of practical advantages could follow in the wake of such knowledge, particularly since "all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature." (T Introduction; SBN xv) By contrast, being stymied by one's sceptical worries can serve no end for oneself or for others. Hume's account makes it clear why relying upon the understanding is more useful than being stymied by one's sceptical worries. Hume also argues that relying upon the understanding is more useful than relying upon superstition and religion. He points out that errors in philosophy are "merely ridiculous" whereas errors in religion are "dangerous." (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 272) Taking the claims of the understanding as being justified is, it would seem, to play it safe, and hence useful to oneself and others.

I conclude, therefore, that Hume is making a practical, and in his broad sense, a moral argument for being disposed to rely upon the understanding, at least where it is "lively." In one way or another, he mobilizes each of the four dimensions of evaluation he recognizes in book III to defend our being disposed to rely upon the claims of the understanding. One might worry that these claims are simply autobiographical, and not made from a "common point of view." If that were so, they would not count as genuinely moral judgments, on Hume's own view. There is an important worry lurking here, one that I turn to in the next section. However, put this bluntly, the worry is unfounded. Hume is clearly not *merely* making some autobiographical comments at the end of book I.

He speaks in the first person simply to make vivid points which generalize beyond his own case. After all, he makes the general claim that "where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us." (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270)

One might in this context complain that Hume has wasted the readers' time, and indeed, may have morally corrupted them. For if we ought to put aside the sceptical worries that he has so brilliantly defended, and go on relying upon the understanding as we always had, why has he troubled us with those sceptical worries at all, particularly since doing so might tempt us toward the morally bankrupt melancholy of the first half of "Conclusion of this book"? Hume has a reply to this worry, though, and it too is a distinctively practical reply. On Hume's view, it is good for people to be exposed to sceptical arguments because exposure to them makes one less dogmatic. Although we should not get so caught up in our sceptical worries as to be tempted to forsake all reasoning, we should remember those worries when we are inclined to be dogmatic. The point is more explicit in the *Enquiries*, where Hume spends some time emphasizing the virtues of "mitigated scepticism." He notes that the "greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions" and throw themselves "precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined" nor do they have "any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments." He thinks exposure to philosophical scepticism can cure this malady, arguing that if "such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state...such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists." (EHU 12.24; SBN 161)<sup>36</sup> This intellectual modesty counts as a virtue in part because the understanding cannot bear its own survey. Had the understanding, when it reflected upon itself from its most general principles, approved of itself, dogmatism



might have been epistemically justified even if morally pernicious, and rationalism would be vindicated.

V.

"There is here an evident sophistry and reasoning in a circle."

-David Hume

Hume faces a seemingly fatal objection. He intends to launch a moral argument in favor of relying upon the understanding. An important element of this moral argument is the claim that relying on the understanding is more useful than giving into superstition and enthusiasm. The religious enthusiast, however, will point out that on her view, it is *very* useful to rely upon superstition and enthusiasm, because on her view doing so will lead to incalculable rewards in the afterlife. It is hard to see how Hume can reply without "reasoning in a circle." He can only launch an *argument* that the religious enthusiast's claim about the afterlife is false by, tacitly anyway, assuming that the understanding's claims upon us are justified. However, if he makes this assumption, the religious enthusiast could complain that he is begging the question. What is at issue between them is whether the understanding's claims on us are justified, so it seems inappropriate for Hume to presuppose the understanding's normativity in defending that very normativity.

Someone might interject at this point on Hume's behalf that the religious enthusiast herself is tacitly presupposing the normativity of the understanding in objecting to Hume on the grounds that he is begging the question. If the claims of the understanding on us are not justified, as the enthusiast urges, why should we care whether we beg the question, or violate any other demand that the understanding makes upon us? Indeed, this strategy for responding to extreme scepticism -- arguing that it is in some way self-stultifying -- has been quite influential in the twentieth century. One might suspect that Hume simply overlooked this strategy. In fact, Hume explicitly considers and rejects this argument as a lame effort to dodge a serious worry:

If the sceptical reasonings be strong, say they, 'tis a proof, that reason may have some force and authority: if weak, they can never be sufficient to invalidate all the conclusions of our understanding. This argument is not just; because the sceptical reasonings, were it possible for them to exist, and were they not destroy'd by their subtlety, wou'd be successively both strong and weak, according to the successive dispositions of the mind. Reason first appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority. Her enemy, therefore, is oblig'd to take shelter under her protection, and by making use of rational arguments to prove the fallaciousness and imbecility of reason, produces, in a manner, a patent under her hand and seal. This patent at first has authority, proportion'd to the present and immediate authority of reason, from which it is deriv'd. But as it is suppos'd to be contradictory to reason, it gradually diminishes the force of that governing power; and its own at the same time; till at last they both vanish away into nothing by a regular and just diminution. (T 1.4.2.12; SBN 186-7)<sup>37</sup>

Although an adequate reconstruction and evaluation of this difficult argument would go well beyond the present scope, it should be apparent from its conclusion that Hume is deeply unimpressed with the charge that scepticism about the understanding is self-defeating because one must rely upon the understanding's authority to question it. Right or wrong, Hume was unwilling to endorse this reply to the opponent of the understanding. So by his own lights, at least, Hume is unable by way of this reply to dodge the charge that he is begging the question against, e.g., the religious enthusiast. On the other hand, that Hume considers this sort of argument suggests that he, unlike many of his commentators, is at least sensitive to the charge that he cannot avoid begging the question against someone who favors superstition over the understanding.

This problem is a pressing one, and before explaining how my interpretation allows Hume to make some progress on it, I should pause briefly over other versions of the pragmatic reading. Consider, for example, Lorne Falkenstein's recent interpretation. On Falkenstein's account, Hume's defense of the understanding ultimately appeals to the virtuousness of curiosity. He argues that on Hume's view, curiosity "can motivate us to engage in the sort of reflection on the reliability of different beliefs and belief-forming mechanisms that activates those natural belief-forming mechanisms that compel us to accept 'second' general rules." As Falkenstein emphasizes, Hume distinguishes between

our initial general rules, such as "Frenchmen cannot be solid" which are fallible, and the "second" general rules we naturally develop upon reflecting on the unreliability of those initial general rules. On Falkenstein's interpretation, curiosity can naturally lead one to accept the more refined principles of the understanding. Furthermore, "since curiosity is a character trait, those who do not reason as philosophers can be blamed for their beliefs...because adoption of 'unphilosophical' belief is indicative of a mind that has not engaged in the kind of reflection that curiosity and a proper respect for the truth demand, and hence of a possible flaw in character."<sup>38</sup>

Falkenstein is right to interpret Hume as giving a practical and indeed moral argument for relying on the understanding. Yet if this were all there was to Hume's account he would be vulnerable to the religious enthusiast's charge of begging the question. Hume characterizes curiosity simply as the "love of truth" (T 2.3.10.1; SBN 448), so on Falkenstein's account, the person who relies upon superstition and ignores philosophical argument must be charged with not caring enough about the truth. It is not too difficult to see how our religious enthusiast will respond - she will claim to care a great deal about the truth, but also claim that the truth cannot be found simply by relying upon the understanding. If we assume that relying upon the understanding is more likely than not to lead to the truth, we will once again be begging the question. If, however, we do not make this assumption, on what grounds can we complain that she does not care enough about the truth? Falkenstein's Hume seems unable to say anything to meet this charge. Falkenstein is right to emphasize curiosity as part of Hume's defense of the understanding, but it cannot be the linchpin of that defense.

Alternatively, one might argue that Hume's justification of relying upon the understanding's most refined rules is ultimately a sort of rule utilitarian one. As the proponents of such interpretations admit, however, the utility of a rule or belief is an externalist feature -- the content of a rule or belief alone does not determine what its consequences are going to be. Unlike some contemporary externalist epistemologists

(e.g., Alvin Goldman) however, Hume seems to want to provide a decision procedure which an agent can deliberately apply in deciding which beliefs to adopt. This seems to leave Hume with no way out, since there just are "no directly accessible features had by all and only reliable belief forming processes."<sup>39</sup> If Hume tries to respond to the charge that he begs the question in relying upon the understanding to see which beliefs, or general policies to govern belief-acquisition, maximize utility, the utilitarian account also leaves him with no resources to do so.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, at this point, it may seem difficult to see how any purely practical interpretation could extricate Hume from this worry.

However, Hume does in fact have at his disposal an interesting strategy for dealing with this objection. Of the four ways in which we might approve of some character trait, at least three of them seem to require some reasoning. To determine whether some trait is useful, either to its possessor or to others, we must do some inductive reasoning. Likewise, to determine that a given character trait is agreeable to others, we must do some reasoning. Crucially, though, for me to determine whether a character trait is immediately agreeable to its possessor, where *I* am the possessor, does not so obviously require any reasoning, although it certainly can be determined via reasoning. Granted, if I want to determine whether your relying on your understanding is immediately agreeable to you, I must rely upon my understanding -- I cannot directly see or feel what it is like for you to rely upon your understanding. On the other hand, it is not so obvious that I must rely upon the understanding, or engage in any reasoning, to determine that a given character trait is immediately agreeable to its possessor, where I *am* the possessor. In this context, Hume's remark that morality "is more properly felt than judg'd of" (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470) is especially helpful and revealing.

Consider Hume's metaphor of the "current of nature." Hume sees himself as beset with a violent desire to put aside his sceptical worries and "submit to" his understanding without hesitation. He does *not* need any operation of the understanding to determine that he has such a desire at that point in time; a desire is a direct passion. (T 2.3.9.2; SBN 438)

Moreover, passions are such that you can know you have one without relying upon the understanding; just as, on the Humean account, with an impression of pain, you can immediately discern that you have one if you do. The analogy with impressions is important; direct passions, like impressions strike us with "most force and violence" (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1) and our knowledge that one is presented to us need not rely upon any reasoning. Direct passions are *not* like the ideas which are "faint images" of impressions, found in "thinking and reasoning." (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1) We do *sometimes* (especially with the calm passions) discern that we have a passion by reasoning backwards from its effects instead of by direct sensation, but this is the exception that illustrates the rule. Indeed, in "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume remarks that, "All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, *and is always real*, wherever man is conscious of it."<sup>41</sup>

This means we can read Hume at the end of book III as deliberating about whether to put aside his sceptical worries, and, *simply by introspecting rather than by reasoning*, noticing a desire, or passion to put aside his sceptical worries and rely on the understanding. This itself represents the discovery of *a* reason to put aside those worries, and rely on the understanding. Having seen that he has such a reason, Hume, reasonably enough, tentatively puts aside those worries and relies upon his understanding. This puts him in a position to do some serious "bootstrapping." For now that he is, with some practical justification, relying upon the understanding, he may reasonably rely upon that understanding, and justifiably, and without begging any questions, begin reasoning to see whether he has any other reasons either for or against so relying that might either supplement or outweigh the his initial reason for doing so. In other words, Hume's passion for philosophy, which he can discover *without reasoning*, gives him some initial, non-question-begging justification for reasoning. With that justification in hand, he *justifiably* begins reasoning in an effort to see whether he has any other reasons to embrace the understanding, or whether he has weightier reasons not to embrace it.<sup>42</sup>

Fortunately, the reasons he discovers once he begins relying on the understanding only serve to supplement, rather than weigh against, his initial reason for embracing the understanding. He knows at this point that the understanding can give him no positive reason to rely upon it or *not* to rely upon it - sceptical arguments leave him in the lurch, with no reason to embrace the understanding *and* no reason not to embrace it. However, as we have seen, he takes the existence of this passion as a reason to rely upon it - why struggle against the "current of nature"? Hence it at least initially seems that the balance of reasons favors relying upon the understanding over suspending judgment. Moreover, his being naturally inclined to put aside his sceptical worries just is his finding it immediately agreeable to put those worries aside. It is with good reason that Hume says that he *feels* (the italics are in the *Treatise*) that he would be a loser in point of pleasure if he were to abandon his philosophy. He sees that putting aside his sceptical worries and relying upon the understanding, even the understanding's more refined principles, is itself immediately agreeable, but he does not see this by reasoning to it from some set of more basic, or given premises; he simply feels it. Further, when he continues reasonably to rely upon the understanding, he comes to see that doing so is also agreeable to others, and useful to himself as others, giving him considerably more justification for so relying. Nor should these justifications any longer be seen as begging the question against the religious enthusiast, since Hume was able to find a reason, in the form of a passion for philosophy, to begin relying upon his understanding without relying upon it, and hence without begging any such questions. Insofar as this initial justification really is a justification, it also gives him legitimate, non-question-begging warrant for going ahead and reasoning about the consequences of reasoning, and to take the conclusions of his ratiocination seriously.

Hume is, then, able to invoke all four of his modes of practical justification without begging any questions, *if* he can invoke the agreeable-to-its-possessor mode without relying on the understanding. The agreeable-to-its-possessor mode is, on my

interpretation, the fulcrum of Hume's argument insofar as it escapes the religious enthusiast's complaint. Hume himself seems to have been aware that this mode of argument was the crucial one, upon which the other three rested. That mode of justification is given considerably more explicit discussion at the end of book I than are the remaining three modes. For example, the one clearly normative epistemic principle he lays down at the end of book I - that where the understanding mixes with some propensity we should assent to it, but where it does not, "it can never have any title to operate upon us." (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) - clearly makes appeal to the immediate agreeableness of relying on the understanding. Moreover, in claiming that where it does not mix with some propensity the understanding can *never* have any title to operate on us, Hume registers that immediate agreeableness is *necessary* for the success of the only sort of justification of the understanding he thinks is possible.

At this point the worry at which I hinted in the preceding section, concerning the common or "general point of view," resurfaces. It might be objected that Hume may not need to engage in any reasoning to determine whether he finds it immediately agreeable to engage in philosophy and rely upon the understanding's most refined principles, but merely enjoying something is not sufficient for its moral desirability on anyone's view. Moral evaluations must be made from an intersubjectively shared point of view. Here it is worth remembering that the general point of view is supposed to correct for distortions in our judgements due to being too close to the person being evaluated as well as distortions due to our being too distant. In the case of one's own moral character, the latter problem is severe since most people are affectively closer to themselves than they are to anybody else.<sup>43</sup> Insofar as taking up the general point of view involves the use of the understanding, Hume still seems to be begging the question.

This objection is a powerful one and it is not clear that Hume has a sufficient reply. However, there are at least two replies worth discussing. First, Hume might bypass the appeal to the general point of view and simply argue that the fact that

something is pleasurable is good in itself. The idea would be to continue to give a practical argument for relying on the understanding, but not necessarily in the first instance a moral one. At a number of points, Hume seems to identify goodness with pleasure. For example, he says, "Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure..." (T 2.3.9.8; SBN 439) suggesting that it is analytic that goodness just is pleasure and evil just is pain. If this is Hume's view (and I cannot pretend to establish such a controversial thesis here!) then the mere fact that he takes pleasure in relying upon the understanding speaks in favor of his doing so quite apart from morality and the general point of view. The idea would be that while moral evaluations require a general point of view, there is a more primitive and basic notion of goodness as pleasantness which requires no such intersubjectivity. Having discovered a reason to rely upon his understanding (albeit not a moral one), Hume could again boot-strap his way into the moral arguments given at the end of book I. For once he has a reason to rely on the understanding scepticism notwithstanding he can continue to rely on the understanding to develop moral arguments even if his initial boot-strapping reason is practical but not moral.

Hume might instead allow that his defense of the understanding is moral throughout, and hence involves the general point of view at every stage, but insist that this does not make the argument circular. Here Hume would have to argue that the objection rests on a misunderstanding of the general point of view and the nature of moral judgement. Taking up the general point of view, he might argue, is not an act of the understanding. Insofar as moral judgement need not involve the use of the understanding, Hume's argument would seem to avoid the charge of circularity. Hume's famous insistence that moral distinctions are not derived from reason is of course relevant here. Hume claims that morality is more properly 'felt than judg'd of' (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470) and argues at some length against his rationalist opponents who try to derive moral judgements from reason. Of course, even Hume would allow that moral discourse



sometimes involves the use of reason. For example, Hume would agree that once we have settled upon a morally desirable end we should use reason to determine how to achieve that end. The idea is that our most fundamental moral judgements are not themselves verdicts of reason, although the application of those verdicts to particular cases will often involve the use of reason. On this interpretation, our most fundamental moral judgements are themselves affective states of a certain kind rather than ideas derived from the understanding. This fits well with a number of Hume's remarks, such as the claim that, "We do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases, we in effect feel that it is virtuous." (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471) This passage and others like it strongly suggest that one Hume's view our most fundamental moral evaluations just are certain kinds of feelings of pleasure, rather than any sort of representational states. In effect, the idea is to interpret Hume's meta-ethics as a sort of proto-expressivist. Of course, this interpretation is itself highly controversial and I lack the space to offer an adequate defense of it here.<sup>44</sup> Instead, I shall explain how such an interpretation would, if correct, rescue Hume from the charge of circularity in the present dialectic. The much larger debate about whether Hume really was an expressivist must await another context. Just to put my cards on the table, though, I think that the question is itself unfortunately anachronistic. Many passages in Hume's work are most naturally understood in expressivist terms, but many other passages are more naturally understood in subjectivist terms. In a way, this is not surprising. For the distinction between subjectivist forms of cognitivism and expressivism is itself a subtle one and was not clearly drawn until the twentieth century. Indeed, even after the distinction was drawn by people like Ayer and Stevenson many of expressivist's intelligent critics continued to confuse expressivism with subjectivism. So there may well be no clear fact of the matter as to whether Hume "really" was a subjectivist cognitivist or an expressivist of some variety. Of course, in saying this I am glossing over an incredibly complex debate, the contours of which I cannot adequately characterize here.

In any event, my claim here is only that given an expressivist reading Hume may be able to avoid the charge of circularity in his defense of the understanding. Insofar as our most fundamental moral judgements do not involve the use of the understanding Hume's moral argument for relying on the understanding need be circular. However, the argument might seem to prove too much. For how can we square an expressivist reading of Hume with the starting point for the objection under discussion? How can an expressivist plausibly understand Hume's remarks about the general point of view without supposing that taking up that perspective necessarily involves the use of reason? Here the expressivist Hume might argue that taking up the general point of view is more an act of imagination and sympathy than an act of the understanding. In taking up the general point of view we must try to imagine the object of evaluation in a certain way and our judgement will be a function of our sympathetic engagement with the characters involved in our act of imagination. So long as Hume can distinguish the understanding from the imagination, this need not in itself make his argument circular.

Matters are slightly more complicated, though. For in taking up the general point of view we must imagine the character trait in question in what we take to be its stereotypical circumstances. So just how we imagine a trait when morally evaluating it depends on our background beliefs as to which conditions are stereotypical, and those beliefs presumably are governed by reason. However, Hume is quite clear that in his view passions based on false or irrational beliefs are not themselves really irrational, although we might sometimes loosely speak as if they are. On his view, it is the beliefs themselves that can be irrational and not any passion based upon one's beliefs: "In short, a passion must be accompany'd with some false judgement, in order to its being unreasonable; and even then 'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment." (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416) Hume holds this view because he understands reason as aiming at truth but holds that passions are "original existences" which refer to nothing outside themselves and hence cannot be true or false. If moral

judgements really just are certain kinds of passions, it follows that moral judgements also cannot be properly be called irrational (or "unreasonable") even if they are causally dependent on a person's beliefs. So on an expressivist's interpretation Hume's moral judgement cannot be criticized as irrational simply because it is based on an irrational belief.

It might seem that on this interpretation Hume will be unable to criticize those who hold perverse sensibilities, but this does not follow. All that follows is that Hume can never criticize those who hold perverse moral sensibilities as irrational, but it does not follow from this that they escape criticism altogether. For Hume can still morally criticize such people, thereby expressing his disapproval of them and their judgements. Here it is important to distinguish subjectivism from expressivism. On a subjectivist reading, it would follow that other people's perverse sensibilities would make their corresponding perverse moral beliefs true – for those beliefs would simply refer to the agent's own perverse sentiments. However, on an expressivist reading a person's moral judgements are not truth-apt to begin with. So on the expressivist reading Hume is not forced to admit that someone else's perverse moral judgements are correct simply because their beliefs about their sentiments are correct. In this respect, Hume the expressivist seems to hold a more plausible view than Hume the subjectivist.

Nonetheless, the religious enthusiast might not be impressed by this line of argument. For the religious enthusiast might agree that being immediately agreeable can qualify a trait as a virtue but still deny that reliance on the understanding is immediately agreeable. Such an enthusiast might share Hume's fundamental moral outlook, but disagree with him about the relevant facts. In this case, Hume presumably would rely on his understanding to argue that reliance on the understanding is immediately agreeable, but this reliance raises the specter of begging the question. Perhaps this charge is unavoidable. In general, the risk of begging the question is directly proportional to how fundamental the question is, and few questions are as fundamental as the question of

whether we are justified in relying on the understanding. However, perhaps Hume need not be too embarrassed by this consequence. For the fact that he would be guilty of begging the question against his religious interlocutor does not impugn Hume's own moral justification for relying on his understanding. Here the expressivist reading of Hume remains important. For in convincing himself that he ought to rely on the understanding it is important that Hume is not already presupposing the legitimacy of the understanding, and an expressivist interpretation of what is involved in taking up the general point of view allows Hume to avoid this presupposition. For on that interpretation, taking up the general point of view need not involve the use of the understanding, as opposed to the imagination and one's sympathetic dispositions. So Hume still has a moral justification for relying on his understanding in general and when arguing with a religious enthusiast. The fact that Hume would in some sense be begging the question in offering such an argument need not bother Hume too much. After all, a question-begging argument can still be sound, and Hume might remind himself of this. Nor is his argument so transparently question-begging and trivial as arguments of the form, 'p, therefore p'. The premises of Hume's argument need not be question-begging. Rather, it is only the presupposition of the justification of relying on the understanding which stands behind his arguments which seems to beg the question. So those arguments are not so trivially question-begging that they could not reasonably convince anyone in the way that arguments of the form, 'p therefore p' are trivially question-begging. Moreover, the understanding could have failed to meet the moral standards Hume endorses. It could have turned out that relying on the understanding was both disutile and disagreeable and this conclusion could even have been reached by using the understanding itself. The understanding could have revealed its own moral perniciousness. So Hume's moral argument at the end of book I is far from trivial even if it does provisionally presuppose what it sets out to defend. So while Hume's reply may

ultimately beg the question against the die-hard misologist, perhaps Hume need not be too bothered about this.

In any event, it is not surprising that Hume's emphasis in "Conclusion of this book" is upon the way in which relying upon the understanding is immediately agreeable. For that is the one kind of practical reason he can cite that stands the best chances of avoiding the circularity worry. Here the first of the two replies discussed above, bypassing the general point of view altogether, is especially important to bear in mind. Once Hume has justified his relying on the understanding by citing the immediate pleasure generated by his doing so, he will also thereby be justified, for the same reason, in relying upon the understanding to determine the consequences of *other* people relying upon their understanding. Furthermore, he will presumably be justified in complaining that those who prefer superstition over philosophy are vicious because such naiveté is dangerous and disagreeable. So long as it is clear that the *initial* justification for Hume's putting his sceptical worries to one side and relying upon his understanding is simply that doing so is immediately agreeable, he will not be "reasoning in a circle" in *then* relying upon that understanding to determine whether those around him are vicious or virtuous.

Moreover, we are also able to avoid the problem that plagued Korsgaard's interpretation. Korsgaard had Hume concluding that the understanding failed the reflective endorsement test (which, on her interpretation, simply *is* the reflexivity test in the case of the understanding) because it disapproved of itself, so that its claims upon us are not justified. She also had him concluding that our moral faculty or point of view *did* pass the reflective endorsement test, because when it reflects upon itself, it approves of itself, so that its claims upon us are justified. The obvious problem is that the moral faculty must enlist the aid of the understanding to be sure that it has an accurate account of its content and origins, and if the understanding's claims upon us are in no sense justified, this reliance is unjustified. On my interpretation, Hume is able to avoid this problem because on his view the understanding's claims on us *are*, in the end, justified,

but ultimately for a practical rather than a theoretical reason. Since he is best read as concluding that the understanding's claims on us are, in this practical way, justified, Hume may happily rely upon the understanding in book III. Hence, Hume is not vulnerable to the objection suggested by Korsgaard's interpretation.

## **VI. Conclusion.**

Despite the sharp contrast between books I and III, Hume should not be seen as concluding that our reliance on the understanding is not justified while our reliance on our moral faculty is justified. Given the inevitable reliance of the moral faculty on the understanding, this interpretation is unstable, and would be uncharitable to attribute to Hume. Rather, Hume's view is that the understanding and our moral faculty both end up being justified, but in different ways. Unlike our moral faculty, the understanding cannot justify itself. That Hume might initially have hoped that the understanding could be justified in that way explains the tone of despair characterizing the end of book I, as contrasted with book III. The contrast is not, as Korsgaard suggests, one between the understanding's not being normative while our moral faculty is. Instead, the contrast is one between the different ways in which those two faculties are justified.

Sadly, I must end on a note that echoes the despairing end of book I more than the enthusiastic end of book III. Insofar as the understanding's normativity justifies the tone of despair at the end of book I, a similar tone of despair should infect the end of book III. The moral faculty must rely on the understanding to test itself for normativity. It would seem, then, that the putative contrast between the moral faculty's normativity and the understanding's normativity is ephemeral. Our confidence in the moral faculty's normativity should only be as strong as the weakest link in our chain of argument for its normativity. Since reliance on the understanding is a link in that chain, our confidence in the moral faculty's normativity can be no greater than our confidence in the normativity of the understanding. They both end up being normative, but it is an illusion, to which

Hume apparently succumbs, to think we should have more confidence about the moral faculty's normativity than we should about that of the understanding.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review*, XCV, 2, April, 1986, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup>References to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* are of the form 'T' followed by numbers marking (respectively) the book, part, section and paragraph from which the passage is taken; this reference will be followed by 'SBN' and the page number of the passage in the Selby-Bigge Edition (revised by Nidditch). References to Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* and Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* shall be of the form 'EHU s.p; SBN q' and 'EPM s.p; SBN q' respectively, where 's' denotes section number, 'p' denotes paragraph number and 'q' denotes page number from the Selby-Bigge edition.

<sup>3</sup>See Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 1991), and Barbara Winters, "Hume on Reason," *Hume Studies*, V, 4, April 1979, pp. 20-35.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that Hume is notoriously slippery in his use of 'reason' and 'the understanding', moving without warning from one sense to another, and leaving it unclear which sense is in play. This feature of Hume's texts has led to a mountain of scholarly discussion. For a reasonably comprehensive bibliography of this literature, see Lorne Falkenstein "Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism in Hume's Account of Belief," *Hume Studies*, XXIII, 1, April, 1997, pp. 63-4, n. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, although most commentators find the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" to be one of the least impressive sections of the *Treatise*, Hume was extraordinarily struck by it. He not only singles it out for special attention in one of the most memorably dramatic and personal passages of the *Treatise* in "Conclusion of this book." He also refers to it, unlike any other section of the *Treatise*, a total of three times in the *Treatise* - twice before it is given and once after. Thanks for David Owen for bringing this to my attention. See his "Reason, Reflection, and Reductios," *Hume Studies* XX, 2, November, 1994, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup>This is a quick and oversimplified characterization of Hume's notorious argument. Any attempt to present the argument as even remotely plausible would go beyond the present scope and moreover in my

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view the argument cannot be rescued. Fortunately, as my aim is to see whether Hume can accept the argument's conclusion without vitiating his overall project, I can happily avoid the question of whether the argument is sound. [For some recent attempts to rehabilitate the argument, see Kevin Meeker, "Hume's Iterative Probability Argument: A Pernicious Reductio," given at the Twenty-Fourth Annual Hume Society Conference, Michael Lynch, "Hume and the Limits of Reason," *Hume Studies* 22, April, 1996, pp. 89-104, and Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), chapter 2.] Moreover, Hume could have defended the claim that the understanding subverts itself, even if the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" is not sound, by appealing to some of his other, seemingly more sound, sceptical arguments. So Hume's worries about the understanding's subverting itself have philosophical significance even if this notorious argument is beyond salvage.

<sup>7</sup>Since the understanding is supposed to subvert *itself*, this entails that the understanding which does the subverting is also the inclusive sort of understanding, and the text bears this out. Hume's argument relies upon the premise that humans are fallible, which is an a posteriori truth. The argument also rests on a dubious piece of demonstrative reasoning, for Hume argues that, "no finite object can subsist under a decrease repeated *in infinitum*." (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 182) If this were true, it would be an a priori truth. So the understanding that does the subverting includes both demonstrative and empirical reasoning, as does the understanding that is subverted. So 'the understanding' in the understanding-subverts-itself thesis should be read inclusively.

<sup>8</sup>It has been suggested that Hume's argument in "Of scepticism with regard to reason," and hence the understanding's subversion of itself, has no epistemic upshot. Don Garrett, for example, has argued that when Hume claims that, "all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence," (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183) we should understand "rules of logic" in a purely psychological way, given Hume's earlier remark that, "the sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas." (T Introduction; SBN xv) Hence, Garrett suggests, the point of Hume's argument is merely to demonstrate a psychological point about the natural



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consequence of our understanding's reflecting upon itself, rather than to make any epistemic point. See Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 227.

It must be admitted that Hume's aim in "Of scepticism with regard to reason" is, as he explicitly notes, "only to make the reader sensible" of the fact that our reasonings concerning cause and effect are derived from "nothing but custom...and belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, rather than of the cogitative part of our nature," (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183) which is a purely psychological result.

However, in making this purely psychological point, Hume incidentally, though self-consciously, makes an epistemic point as well. For Hume does suppose that the correct rules of logic have prima facie epistemic authority; Garrett's dismissal of Hume's reference to "all the rules of logic" as purely psychological is too quick. The point of logic may, in Hume's view, merely be to explain the actual principles of our reasoning faculty. However, this is compatible with his thinking that those principles, or at least, of those principles, the ones which can withstand reflective scrutiny (as represented, e.g., by Hume's "rules by which to judge of causes and effects") do, carry prima facie epistemic weight, in virtue of being the ones we reflectively embrace. On Hume's view, of course, to answer the psychological question, "Which principles of logic garner our reflective approval?" we must do psychology, and to answer this question is, in his sense, to study logic. Hence, the methodology and aim of logic is psychological. However, Hume also supposes, the principles of logic which garner such approval are at least prima facie justified. That such reflective endorsement carries normative weight is presumably why Hume claims, for example, that the rules by which to judge of causes and effects represent, "all the LOGIC" he thinks "*proper* to employ" in his reasoning (T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175, emphasis mine). Further, Hume's principles of "philosophical probability" are explicitly contrasted with "unphilosophical probability," with the former being characterized as a "reasonable foundation" of belief and opinion, and the latter being held not to provide any such foundation (T 1.3.8.1; SBN 143).

Indeed, in speaking of "all the rules of logic," Hume is presumably restricting his attention only to those rules of logic which he thinks garner reflective endorsement, as opposed to the principles of

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unphilosophical probability, and bad general rules, as "Frenchmen cannot have solidity." For if we include whatever silly principles of logic people unreflectively follow, it will not be true that "all the rules of logic" favor the diminution of all belief and evidence. If, however, Hume's argument were of purely psychological interest, what is the motivation for focusing on those principles of logic which garner reflective endorsement, rather than the rest? One plausible motivation would be that he thinks those principles, unlike the other ones, have *prima facie* epistemic authority.

If the understanding's favored rules of logic did not carry any *prima facie* authority, Hume's melancholy at the end of book I would be mysterious - why be so concerned about the self-subversion of the understanding and its favored rules of logic if those rules never carried any *prima facie* epistemic authority in the first place? Rather, the tone of that melancholy suggests that the understanding's subversion of itself robbed Hume of a reason to embrace the understanding - that is why, in the "Conclusion of this book," right after referring to the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason," he goes on to ask whether he should accept a "false reason," that is, one whose claims to epistemic authority are self-effacing. Moreover, if Hume were making a purely psychological point in "Of scepticism with regard to reason," it is at least odd that he speaks there of what all the rules of logic "require," rather than of what they would *cause*, if consistently applied.

Nor, I should add, is the *prima facie* epistemic authority of the understanding suspended in the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason," as Garrett suggests. Garrett's thought is that since what is being challenged by the sceptic is the reliability of the understanding in causing true beliefs, the argument itself must not presuppose that reliability, for "it is precisely the assumption of the reliability and worthiness of our reasoning faculty that is undergoing scrutiny." (Garrett, p. 227) This overlooks the structure of Hume's argument, which is a *reductio* of the understanding itself - since the argument has the form of a *reductio*, it is perfectly legitimate to assume, for *reductio*, the epistemic authority of the understanding, and use that very authority to undermine itself. That this is Hume's idea is demonstrated by the "reason in her throne" passage, which I discuss below in the text. For present purposes it is worth emphasizing that in that passage Hume is keen to emphasize that reason begins with some authority, as,

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"Reason first appears in possession of the throne...with an absolute sway and authority." (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 186, emphasis mine)

<sup>9</sup>In the introduction to the *Treatise*, he remarks that, "if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, 'tis certain that it must lie very deep and abstruse" (T Introduction; SBN xiv) and that we must "glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life." (T Introduction; SBN xix)

<sup>10</sup>Here, of course, I assume that Hume's view of the normative status of the understanding does not fundamentally change from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiries*, though I lack the space to argue for that thesis here.

<sup>11</sup>In particular, one might be led by reflection upon what kinds of considerations are as much as relevant to the normativity of the understanding to conclude that Hume must think the understanding's claims upon us are not in any sense justified. For if one supposes that *only* the evaluations of the understanding are relevant to the justification of the understanding, then it might seem that once Hume concludes that the understanding does not approve of itself, he can no longer plausibly conclude that it is in any sense justified. Korsgaard herself is deeply influenced by this train of thought, defending the claim that for Hume the understanding's claims are in no sense justified by appealing to the premise that Hume is committed to thinking that the "only point of view from which we can assess the normativity of the understanding is therefore that of the understanding itself...only the reflexivity test could establish the normativity of belief." (Korsgaard, pp. 65 and 67). If this were correct, it would follow immediately from Hume's conclusion that the understanding fails reflexivity that it is not normative, which is to say that its claims on us are not justified. In fact, however, there is no reason to think that Hume is committed to thinking that the only point of view relevant to the normativity of the understanding is the understanding itself. Indeed, as I shall argue, there is good evidence that he rejects this view, as he supposes that practical considerations of the sort canvassed by our moral faculty are relevant to the understanding's normativity.

<sup>12</sup>He maintains, for example, in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" that, "'tis 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; SBN 187) Even more strikingly, he claims that, "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has

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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 out eyes towards them in broad sunshine. Whoever has taken pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist..." (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183)

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for highlighting this concern.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Wilson makes this point in "Hume's Defence of Causal Inference," *Dialogue XXII* (1983), 661-694.

<sup>15</sup> He goes on to argue that this is *especially* so in the moral case, "where there is a much greater complication of circumstances, and where those views and sentiments, which are essential to any action of the mind, are so implicit and obscure that they often escape our strictest attention..." (T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175).

<sup>16</sup> In this vein, he claims that someone who is tormented for no apparent reason with apprehension of "spectres in the dark, may perhaps be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of men" (T 1.4.4.1; SBN 226).

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is not even altogether clear that Hume consistently thinks we *cannot* keep such sceptical worries before our mind when we engage in the common life, since he notes that the evaporation of scepticism in the common life "proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination" and goes on to ask, "how far we ought to yield to these illusions." (T ; 1.4.7.6; SBN 267) If Hume literally thought we could not help but yield to these illusions when we engage in the common life, this question would not be one he could seriously ask, given that ought implies can. For present purposes I will ignore this complication.

<sup>19</sup> Someone sympathetic to the Korsgaard's account might allow the point, but argue that it simply forces a slight modification in the form of her account as a way of making Hume's overall view consistent. Instead of simply insisting that on Hume's view, when we expose our moral faculty to the reflexivity test that we are thinking about the common life, she might attribute to him the stronger claim that we are actually

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*engaging in* the common life when we do so. Then it would follow that we would be immune from our sceptical worries about the understanding when we enlist its aid to scrutinize the origins and content of morality. However, it is simply not plausible to read Hume as holding that when we test our moral faculty for normativity, we are actually engaging in the common life, as opposed to taking the more philosophical attitude he adopted "in the study" to test the understanding for normativity. After all, both with the understanding and the moral faculty, we are testing for normativity, so on the face of it one would think that in each case we would test for it from the same point of view. One might emphasize the distinctively practical nature of morality on Korsgaard's behalf as a motivation for changing perspectives, but this would only seem to establish that in making typical moral judgments we are engaging in the common life, *not* that we do so in making a distinctively philosophically motivated moral judgment about our moral faculties themselves.

In this context it is also worth emphasizing Hume's famous distinction between two kinds of moralists - Hume metaphorically distinguishes between the moralizing of the painter and the moral theory of the anatomist. The moralist as painter strives to portray morality in its most favorable light. The anatomist, by contrast, has the job of uncovering the underlying nature of morality, peeling away its superficial appearance, however disturbing that underlying nature might be. Clearly, in pursuing an accurate picture of morality's content and origins, we are doing moral theory as the anatomist and Hume almost certainly see himself throughout the *Treatise* in the role of the anatomist. He concludes, however, that the anatomist must engage in "*the most abstract speculations* concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining" so that practical morality may become "more persuasive in its exhortations." (T 1.3.6.6; SBN 621, emphasis added) This makes it clear that in testing our moral faculty for normativity we must do the work of the anatomist, which requires "the most abstract" reasonings. Hence it would be implausible to attribute to Hume the view that in testing our moral faculty for normativity we are simply engaging in the common life, as *contrasted* with the distinctively abstract reasonings we use in the study to test the understanding for normativity.

<sup>20</sup>See Baier, chapters 3, 4, and 12, and Winters.

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<sup>21</sup>For example, he is careful to distinguish "liberty of spontaneity" from "liberty of indifference." (T 2.2.3.1; SBN 407)

<sup>22</sup>For more textual evidence and argumentation in support of this objection, see David Owen, pp. 202-204.

<sup>23</sup> As Hume remarks in that section his rules are such that they "might have been supply'd by the natural principles of our understanding...our logicians shew no such superiority above the mere vulgar in their reason and ability...all the rules of this nature are very easy in their invention." (T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175)

<sup>24</sup>Owen, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup>It is, however, worth noting that rejecting the reductio reading as a way of resolving this tension is compatible with seeing Hume as going on to work with two conceptions of what counts as "reasonable" - one tied to rationalism and the other not, although there are grounds for being sceptical of even this claim.

<sup>26</sup>Baier, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup>See Baier, chapters 9 and 12.

<sup>28</sup>I should note that in pressing this interpretation I reject Korsgaard's assumption that the only faculty salient to the normativity of the understanding is the understanding itself, since on my interpretation, our moral faculty is salient to the normativity of the understanding. It is for this reason that I suggested earlier that Korsgaard underestimates Hume in asserting that he only had in mind the reflexivity test in the *Treatise*. On my interpretation, he had in mind the full reflective endorsement methodology, upon which our putatively normative faculties evaluate each other as well as themselves. In another paper, "Reflective Endorsement: A Liberal Interpretation," I argue in more detail against Korsgaard's argument for the conclusion that the understanding itself is the *only* faculty salient to its normativity.

<sup>29</sup>Thanks to Annette Baier for emphasizing the subtle fine-grains of Hume's actual view; I unfortunately lack the space in the present context to delve into how these more fine-grained distinctions might be relevant for the argument of book I's "Conclusion of this book."

<sup>30</sup>He also tells us that he must "yield to the current of nature in submitting to" his senses and understanding (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). I take it that talk of yielding to the "current of nature" strongly suggests something which is immediately agreeable; resisting the current of nature certainly does not sound particularly agreeable. Note that here, as well as elsewhere, Hume is emphasizing the intrinsic

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value of relying on the understanding, and not simply the intrinsic value of asking philosophical questions. Jack Lyons, in an unpublished essay, urges that on Hume's view, "there is no evidence of any sort of intrinsic value that differs between the two sorts of rules." The passages cited in the text speak against this claim.

<sup>31</sup>In this vein, Hume also rhetorically asks whether he must seclude himself, "in some measure from the commerce and society of men, *which is so agreeable*." (T 1.4.7.10 ;SBN 270, emphasis mine) If he were to make an effort to resist the claims of the understanding, Hume would have to stay very focused on his sceptical arguments against that faculty, and certainly would have to do his best to avoid engaging in the common life, since once he does that he cannot help but submit to his understanding. Only when he is "in the study" and very intently focused on his sceptical arguments can Hume find himself "ready to reject all belief and reasoning" (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268). Of course, as was emphasized in section II, Hume does not think anyone can fully resist the inclination to rely upon the understanding; he who cavails against the "total sceptic" has disputed without an antagonist. Nonetheless, at the end of book I, Hume does seem to allow that he can, to some degree resist the claims of the understanding, for some time; so long as he maintains an "*intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason" his brain can be so "heated" that he becomes "ready to reject all belief and reasoning." The point is that Hume realizes that he *could* make an effort to stay focused on his sceptical arguments, and hence do his best to resist the claims of the understanding, but he realizes that if he were to do so, he would have to cut himself off from the commerce of men which is "so agreeable." So again we see Hume suggesting that the "wise man" who submits to his understanding so long as it "mixes itself with some propensity" has a character trait which is immediately agreeable to himself.

<sup>32</sup>Furthermore, Hume compares philosophy to superstition, and concludes that he shall "make bold to recommend philosophy" and "not scruple to give it the preference superstition of every kind and denomination." (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271) Hume is comparing two modes of inquiry, if superstition deserves that title, and arguing that philosophy - carefully reasoning in a calm and relatively unbiased way - is superior to superstition. A crucial element of this defense is the claim that "superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to

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disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions" whereas philosophy, "if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the object of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities." (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271-2) Once again, we see Hume defending our relying upon the understanding on the grounds that doing so is immediately agreeable, or at the very least, not as immediately disagreeable as the alternative.

It might be objected at this point that Hume's view overlooks the way in which people often seem to be very comforted by the belief in an afterlife. Surely in this regard, a reliance upon superstition may be immediately agreeable. We get some idea, I think, of how Hume would respond to this objection from his death-bed interview with James Boswell. Boswell asks Hume whether "the thought of Annihilation ever gave him any uneasiness" and Hume replies "not the least, no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius had observed." In addition to referencing the Lucretian argument, Hume goes on to emphasize that a future state "was always seen through a gloomy medium; there was always a Phlegethon or a Hell." See Appendix A of Norman Kemp Smith's edition of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1947), pp. 76-79.

<sup>33</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing me more on this point.

<sup>34</sup> Most commentators have seen this part of book I simply as a rather self-indulgent exhibition of Hume's desire for literary fame, a passion he freely admits to having in his autobiography; he simply seems to be worried that his work is too academic and sceptical, and that neither he nor it will be well received. If, however, my interpretation is correct, there is more to Hume's remarks than this; they do some real philosophical work by illustrating how submitting to one's understanding and resisting sceptical worries would be immediately agreeable to others, and hence virtuous.

<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Jay Rosenberg for emphasizing the distinction between the immediate agreeableness of a disposition to rely upon the understanding and the immediate disagreeableness of its absence.

<sup>36</sup> In the *Enquiries* Hume gives a second reason for exposing people to philosophical scepticism, one that is not so clearly in the *Treatise*, though one cannot help but think he had it in mind even then. He argues there that such exposure will lead us not only to be modest in our conviction, but modest in our *aims*, not



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getting caught up in religious and metaphysical disputes that are impossible to resolve and, in some cases, dangerous. In particular, he argues that those who have been exposed to philosophical scepticism "will never be tempted to go beyond the common life" and this is a salutary effect since if we "cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn" then how could we ever expect to satisfy ourselves "concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to, eternity?" (E 12.25; SBN 162)

<sup>37</sup>This passage is often overlooked by commentators, even when it speaks against their objections. For example, Lorne Falkenstein argues that it is inappropriate for Hume to rely upon the conclusions of inductive reasoning (such as the conclusion that he is a fallible reasoner) in arguing against deductive reason, as he does in "Of scepticism with regard to reason," given the sceptical arguments against induction that Hume had at that point already given. Since deductive reasoning is unable to demonstrate that our inferences from past to future are legitimate, it is "unclear why it should accept this particular inference from past to future experience." (Falkenstein, p. 44) Falkenstein does not explicitly discuss the "reason in her throne" passage, though it seems to hold the key to avoiding his objection. Assuming that 'reason' in the "reason in her throne" passage should be read as including both inductive and deductive reasoning, it follows that Hume thinks we can undermine the authority of reason, so understood, by assuming its validity for the sake of argument and then showing how it must lack that validity. We assume, for the sake of argument, that reason has "absolute sway and authority," which is to say, we assume that our common sense picture of inductive and deductive reasoning is correct, and then go on to show how that assumption is self-defeating. Since we can, without committing any sort of fallacy, assume that standard patterns of inductive reasoning are valid for the sake of argument *even if* we have already shown that, in fact, they lack that validity, this means that Falkenstein's objection is wrongheaded, unless he has some further objection to the argument of the "reason in her throne" passage. Of course, everything depends on what Hume means by 'reason' and he does not explicitly tell us, though the arguments given in the text strongly suggest that he is talking about reason, or the understanding, in the inclusive sense in this section.

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Indeed, the "reason in her throne" passage occurs in the very section Falkenstein is criticizing, and seems explicitly intended to rebut the sort of objection he offers. Falkenstein can be seen as offering a version of the dilemma Hume describes in the beginning of this passage as "unjust" - that sceptical reasonings are either valid or not, and either way, reason ends up counting as valid; Falkenstein simply emphasizes the second horn of the dilemma on the grounds that Hume has already shown that such reasonings are not valid. So it is odd that he does not explicitly mention this passage. In spite of Hume's enthusiasm for it, the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" is deeply suspicious, but Falkenstein's objection seems simply to ignore an important piece of that argument.

<sup>38</sup>Falkenstein, p. 54.

<sup>39</sup>See David Lyons' unpublished paper, "General Rules and Justificational Criteria: Hume's Defense of Philosophy in the *Treatise*." Lyons may think that the switch from act to rule-utilitarianism will help here, but it is unclear to me from his discussion what his grounds would be for supposing this to be so.

<sup>40</sup>Although I lack the space here to press the point, it seems to me that all of the existing pragmatist interpretations of Hume's reaction to scepticism fall prey to this worry in one way or another. In addition to Falkenstein, the pragmatist accounts of Ardal, Fogelin, Lyons, and Owen seem vulnerable to this sort of worry. Although Ardal's account is close enough to my own to have the same resources to avoid this worry; he simply never explicitly considers it and develops those resources as I do below. See Ardal, "Some implications of the Virtue of Reasonableness in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume: A Re-evaluation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), pp. 91-108. See also David Owen, "Philosophy and the Good Life: Hume's Defence of Probable Reasoning," *Dialogue* XXXV (1996), 485-503, and Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

<sup>41</sup>David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 230.

<sup>42</sup>Thanks to Jay Rosenberg for highlighting that Hume cannot even see that the weight of reasons favors relying on the understanding without relying on it, so even this rather simple move must come after some bootstrapping.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Elizabeth Radcliffe and Ken Winkler for emphasizing this point in correspondence.

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<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Sturgeon makes an interesting and impressive case for reading Hume as a kind of cognitivist; I lack the space here to discuss Sturgeon's detailed and important arguments. See his "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies*, April 2001.

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