

# HUME AND REASON

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## Abstract

*In this article I challenge the current view that Hume is a naturalist as well as a sceptic. I hold he is a peculiar kind of rationalist. I argue that his position is best viewed as a philosophical approach designed to accommodate the tendencies of human nature. This task is carried out by means of a second order reflection, which turns out to be based upon reason of a non demonstrative kind. It is brought into clear focus when the mind discovers a conflict between two tendencies. In section one, I highlight this kind of conflict in Hume's account of causal inference. In section two I unfold the conflict that can be found in his account of our belief in the continued and independent existence of objects. In section three I show how it is possible to reconcile our tendencies. I maintain that this reconciliation is effected by means of second order, reason-based arguments. In section four, I examine the status of Hume's scepticism in the light of the preceding account and conclude that his standpoint is not sceptical at all.*

## 1 Our Belief in Causal Relations

A considerable number of Hume commentators have classed his philosophy as naturalistic.<sup>1</sup> This is so because Hume has often been viewed as providing a naturalistic account of how we come to have our most basic beliefs, in opposition to those Cartesian philosophers who struggle to explain this by means of reason based accounts.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation presupposes a sharp distinction between arguments whose basis lies solely in reason and arguments whose basis lies in our feelings or our instincts. In this way, Descartes' proof of the existence of God in the Third Meditation for example, may be considered as an argument of the first kind. Therein we can find ra-

tional, a priori principles only. For example, a principle that plays a crucial role in the proof is that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause (cf. Descartes 1984, p. 28). According to Descartes, this principle is not learned from experience. Rather, it is discovered by means of conceptual analysis. In Hume's terms, it arises from an examination of relation of ideas. Proponents of the naturalistic interpretation of Hume quote as an example of an argument of the second kind his celebrated sceptical solution to the problem of the cause-effect relation, whose source he locates in custom as a natural instinct.

As I see it, though, this distinction is a mere step in the whole process of constituting the desired science of man. Hence, I shall argue that Hume's naturalistic arguments are just one aspect of a much more ambitious project. I intend to show that his philosophy is an attempt to encompass and reconcile the distinct tendencies of human nature. The tension arising from these, as well as the need to overthrow it, will force us into a higher, second order, level of reflection whereby only a kind of solitary but non-Cartesian, non-demonstrative, reason is found pulling the strings of our enquiries. It is solitary because it is not accompanied by, or dependent upon, any other human capacity. It is non-demonstrative because it does not aim at establishing logical proofs. Once this sense of reason is brought to the fore and its role in Hume's epistemology is determined, it will be possible to oppose the dominant view in Hume's scholarship that he is a proponent of scepticism. His so-called 'mitigated scepticism' will be characterised as just a label for an epistemological procedure that should precede any attempt to constitute the science of man.

I take it a good start would be to focus on Hume's account of causality. Let us then follow his path on this subject in order to see where it gets us to. Since the argument is well known, I shall not rehearse it exhaustively. The premises of the argument can be summarised as follows. First, according to Hume, the perceptions of the mind are divided into impressions, or more lively perceptions, and ideas that are said to be copies of the former. So, in order to determine the meaning of an idea, we need to look for its correspondent impression. Second, ideas are connected with each other through three kinds of association, namely, resemblance, contiguity in time

and place and causation. Third, the acts of the mind are divided into relations of ideas (demonstrative reasoning) and matters of fact (empirical reasoning). Hume claims that, while demonstrative reasonings require nothing but reason with its a priori principles and rules, empirical reasonings are all “founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*” (E §22). Whatever empirical research we may be engaged in, we inevitably end up drawing causal inferences. Finally, and no less important, causal inferences make us *believe*, on the basis of the appearance of *A*, that *B* will occur, provided that past experience showed *A* and *B* constantly and repeatedly conjoined. When we get an impression of *A*, we not only have the idea of *B*, we really come to believe in the occurrence of *B*. This is so because a share of vivacity is passed from the impression *A* to the idea *B*.

Hume makes it clear that demonstrative reason cannot engender this sort of connection. First, from the impression *A* we cannot derive a priori the idea *B*. It is not contradictory to suppose that the patterns observed in past events may change in the future. Second, if demonstrative reason were behind the wheel here, a causal belief could arise from just one instance or just one pair of events and not, as Hume argues for, from the repetition of those pairs.<sup>3</sup> Third, *A* and *B* are quite different from each other, so that the presence of the latter can never be inferred from that of the former without the assistance of experience. My switching on the central heater is a quite distinct event from the warming up of the room. I cannot deduce the latter from the former, for there is nothing in the observed event that can lead me to the thought of the unobserved one without my assessing experience. What is more, even if we allow experience to help demonstrative reason, we can never justify the inference of the unobserved from the observed event. That is to say, even if we set demonstrative reason to reflect upon the past pairs of *As* and *Bs* we can never deduce, from the appearance of an *A*, that a *B* will come about. Any demonstrative proof starting off with the constant conjunction of past *As* and *Bs* as a premise and with the certainty that *B* will occur after *A* has occurred as a conclusion will be a *non sequitur*. If demonstrative reason could not do that with respect to one instance only, it remains helpless with respect to a number of them. What is it then, that yields the belief that *B* will occur, given that

A is being observed? Hume does not hesitate to contend that it can only be custom. From the occurrence of many instances of pairs of A and Bs, the mind is irresistibly led, given an impression A, to expect B. Constant conjunction 'accustoms' the mind to anticipate B after the occurrence of A. Custom lies then at the foundation of all causal reasoning. It is "as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love", it is "a species of natural instincts" (E §38).

I would like to focus my analysis of Hume's conception of causality on the idea of constant conjunction, inasmuch as Hume regards it as an essential component of causal inference. The question I wish to pose is this: Is it not the case that some conjunctions, however recurrent, are just non-causal? Consider two events, namely 'the whistle of the train' and 'the arrival of the train at the railway station'. It is undeniable that there is a considerable number of past instances of these two events in our lives. There is no causal connection here. The whistle of the train does not cause the arrival of the train. However, according to Hume's viewpoint, since I saw in the past many instances where the whistle of the train preceded its appearance at the railway station, my mind is led to the irresistible belief that these two events are causally connected. Now, I know that this cannot be correct. But how do I know that? From what has been said so far, Hume can only contend that, given the conditions for the belief in causality to come about, especially constant conjunction, we are bound to hold the belief to be true, but what if it is further verified that it is really not so? Stroud raises this kind of question. He claims that if "observed constant conjunctions always" led us "to generalise from those observed conjunctions onto the unobserved", then "we would have no expectations at all — or what comes to the same thing, we would expect everything". So, Stroud concludes, according to Hume's theory as it stands we are inevitably and irresistibly "led to believe there is a causal connection" whenever a considerable number of pairs of events show regularity (Stroud 1977, pp. 93–4). This puts Hume at odds with our every day experience. There is a huge number of cases of events constantly conjoined that we do not take to be instances of the cause-effect relation.

Stroud's reservation, however, is unjustified. The way out is shown by Hume himself. There is at least one passage in the *Treatise* where

he shows that he is quite aware of the problem. He reminds us that complex, constantly conjoined states of affairs encompass essential as well as accidental aspects. Now, it is "the nature of custom not only to operate with its full force when objects are presented, that are exactly the same with those to which we have been accustom'd, but also to operate in an inferior degree, when we discover such as are similar" (T 147). If the accidental aspects are great in number, they influence the imagination so as to make us expect that they will occur in lieu of the essential ones. At this juncture, Hume advises us to look for more information from experience, which is to say, to correct our inferences appealing to more empirical research.<sup>4</sup> Further experiments will teach us that the conception of accidental repetition stems from the idea that the sequence of pairs can break the pattern at any time, or rather, from the belief that the pattern is being preserved by accident only. In turn, the belief that propels the mind through custom to the unobserved moves along a rather distinct path. If pairs of events keep showing up one after another and no exception has been observed, we cannot help believing that these events are causally conjoined. As Baier points out, for "a custom of causal inference to be set up, by Hume's account, we need to experience 'frequent' cases of the conjunction in question, and no counter-examples" (Baier 1991, p. 113). We are then led through custom to believe that the cause-effect sequence we have observed is a finite sub-class of an infinite class of pairs causally linked from past to open future, that is, an infinite class that admits no anomaly. But in the case of accidental constant repetitions, we not only allow for such an anomaly, we actually *presuppose* that, despite its not having yet been observed, it is inevitable that the anomaly will show up sooner or later. (Cf. Pears 1990, p. 82.) This means that we cannot consider an accidental constant repetition in the past as a finite sub-class of an infinite class of pairs constantly conjoined. In Rosenberg's words, the distinction "between these two types of sequence consists in every causal sequence instantiating some law(s) or other while no accidental sequences do so" (1993, p. 72). On that score, Hume introduces some general rules as a set of instructions that we should follow in our causal inferences. This means that his account is not limited to explaining the origin of our beliefs. It also furnishes

rules to correct them<sup>5</sup> They are employed to distinguish, amongst other things, “accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes” (T 149) In so doing, we are capable of considering events such as ‘the whistle of the train’ and ‘the arrival of the train at the railway station’ as merely accidentally, not causally, connected, no matter how frequent their conjunction

The idea I should like to introduce is, then, this We have a conflict that arises when we try to distinguish accidental from causal connections Our judgement tells us that some pairs of As and Bs are merely accidentally conjoined, but our instincts send us off on the opposite direction, i e , they draw us to the idea that those pairs are causally linked Otherwise expressed, our understanding and our instincts do not get along in this particular and clash with each other When this happens, we are forced to step back so as to assess the conflicting tendencies of the mind Now, the reasoning through which we not only take account of this conflict but also become aware of the need to observe general rules moves us to another level of reflection whereby we ponder and weigh the pros and cons in order to eliminate the conflict and solve the problem It is a level of argumentation that stands in the shadows behind our reasonings It is employed to prevent us from our rendering ourselves *unreflectingly* to our instincts and to allow us to discern mere coincidences from actual expressions of the causal relation (cf T 267) It instructs us to discard custom-based beliefs that do not fit into those general rules and at the same time to uphold beliefs that accord with these rules As a matter of fact, it tells the mind what to believe Sometimes we are driven into counterfeit beliefs (cf T 123) which must be distinguished from genuine ones (cf T 121, 631) Custom may continue to yield irresistible feelings, but it is this reflection on the meta-level that ultimately turns them into either legitimate or expendable items Such a meta level procedure steers us through our lives Without it, our empirical investigations would go irretrievably astray My intent in section 3 is to scrutinise this kind of meta level procedure I shall contend that reason can be said to be the faculty responsible for these meta-level reflection For the time being, though, let us see whether this meta-level reflection can also be detected in connection with the problem of the continued existence of objects

## 2. Our Belief in the Continued Existence of External Objects

The results reached above point to the fact that, as far as Hume's account of causal relations is concerned, there is a sense in which it can be said that a second order process of thought guided by reason plays a significant role in Hume's system. Can the same be said concerning our belief in the continued and independent existence of external objects? If reason is here interpreted as demonstrative, the answer is certainly 'no'. Hume furnishes two motives to support the claim that demonstrative reason cannot play a constitutive role in producing our belief in the external world. For brevity's sake, I shall call (O) our belief that there are external objects. The first motive is that arguments from demonstrative reason are not known by the whole of mankind. The average man probably never heard of them and still holds (O), so that he must get (O) from somewhere else.

The second has to do with the origin of our idea of interrupted perceptions. It is through demonstrative reason that we come up with the conclusion that perceptions are dependent upon the mind. This means that there is a clash between demonstrative reason and (O). According to Hume, those modern philosophers who have been particularly preoccupied with the epistemic status of (O) — or with what is currently called 'the problem of the external world' — tackled this clash by means of the assumption of the double existence of perceptions and objects. Even if we subscribed to such a theory, Hume holds, demonstrative reason would be as inefficient as ever. Were it the source of the belief in (O), demonstrative reason would have to allow an inference from our impressions (which vary) to their objects (which do not). Demonstrative reason would have to take us from the undoubted existence of impressions to the doubtful existence of the alleged objects that lie behind them. This is impossible. Such an inference, according to Hume, would have to be a causal one. But causal connections demand that we experience a constant conjunction between the cause and the effect. In this case though, only one of the kinds of items supposedly related is experienceable, namely, impressions. Therefore, demonstrative reason is unsuitable to be the source of (O). From the existence of impressions, we can never "form

any conclusion concerning the existence of" objects, so that we can never "satisfy our reason in this particular" (T 212)

What is alluded to here is that since *experience* never furnishes the connection between perception and object, demonstrative reason is the only alternative left to ground (O). Experience cannot provide what is required for us to hold (O), and neither can demonstrative reason. If this is so then, we may contend that an argument from experience lies at the heart of Hume's battle against reason. Hume appeals to experience to impugn reason. We have seen that, according to Hume, empirical reasoning is ultimately dependent upon nature, or rather, upon habit. Consequently, we are allowed to claim that Hume resorts to it so as to repudiate reason. His attempt to dismiss demonstrative reason by means of itself can only work out properly through a built in, instinct-based argument. If this is so, I consider it an error to argue, as Bennett and Stroud do, for a twofold phase in Hume's thought<sup>6</sup>. They believe that it has a negative phase in which metaphysical concepts and solutions are systematically bombarded and dismissed, and a positive phase, in which his naturalistic response to traditional philosophical problems is introduced and developed. I hold that this interpretation does not do justice to the complexity of Hume's argument. As just shown, Hume introduces the tools of his alleged positive phase in the negative one. In other words, in his project of demolishing reason, he already makes use of elements found in his allegedly positive phase.

From the failure of demonstrative reason as a single tool to solve philosophical puzzles it does not follow that it is impossible to explain our beliefs, especially (O). If we allow ourselves to be guided by nature, we can protect (O) from total or radical scepticism. Once our natural instincts are brought onto the scene, Hume contends, it does not make sense to doubt (O) (cf T 187). Such a belief seems to be unavoidable. It is a point "which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (T 187). I cannot help believing that there is a world outside my apartment, that my office at the College is still there, although I am not there right now, that the Tower of London continues to exist although I am now back in Brazil and am unable to experience it, etc. In a word, holding (O) is compulsory.

Hume's argument to bear out the idea that instinct based argu



ments can explain our having (O) only to a certain point is somewhat complex. I shall just sketch its main steps. First, he holds that the succession of perceptions that leads to the idea of the continued and independent existence of objects exhibits two features, namely constancy and/or coherence. When I look out of the window I see the street, buildings, houses. I look away for a moment and then look back at these things. Everything seems unaltered. They continue to occupy the same place, to display the same features. This characteristic is supposed to be found in all alleged external objects. Then I go for a walk to refresh my mind after studying the whole morning. When I come back home, I may observe my room slightly changed, say, the papers on the table may be scattered by the wind, the coup of tea may be cold, etc. Nonetheless, even when changes happen, there still remains a certain coherence amongst the objects. "I am accusom'd in other instances to see a like alteration produc'd in a like time" (T 195)

So far so good. The problem arises when we consider that, although we experience, for example, a succession of perceptions of the sun, sometimes this succession is interrupted and we are led by constancy and coherence to think that the perceptions occurred before and after the interruption are "individually the same". Now, granted the interruption, there is no guarantee of identity between the items at the two extremes of it. Impressions are distinct from each other. As soon as the late perception shows up, the former is gone. Hume claims that the mind tends to play down the tension between identity and interruption by positing a real existence. The mind bypasses the conflict by considering that, although interrupted perceptions may differ from each other, they nevertheless 'represent' the same object, one that cannot be captured by the senses. The notion of identity is introduced by combining the notion of an unchangeable object with our awareness of time or, as Hume puts it, by mixing up the ideas of unity and number. To think of an unchanged, uninterrupted and enduring object is to conceive of a certain unity that remains unaltered through a number or multiplicity of instants. Since all we have access to in our experience is a changing series of perceptions, we cannot help 'imagining' a changeless object backing up the idea of identity. Imagination is, then, the source of our be-

lief in the continued and independent existence of objects, that is, in (O) While the senses provide us with a series of unconnected, discontinuous impressions, the imagination comes up to smooth over such a discontinuity, so that we are led to suppose “the change to lie only in the time” and thereby to regard the series to be a “continu’d view of the same object” (T 203)

It would be reasonable to suppose that the imagination does the job of disguising the breaks between perceptions by means of the cause effect relation and *a fortiori* by means of custom. However, this is not quite what happens. Hume contends that the “conclusion from the coherence of appearances arises from the understanding, and from custom in an indirect and oblique manner” (T 197). Hume furnishes a cryptic explanation of how we end up transferring the coherence we found in perceptions to the coherence of objects.<sup>7</sup> I believe, though, that it is possible to make this point clearer. Recall that the problem started when the mind was presented with a conflict between identity and interruption. In view of this, it “must be uneasy and will naturally seek relief from the uneasiness”. Now, any conflict amongst ideas can be detected and dealt with only by means of the understanding, i.e., “the general and more establish’d properties of the imagination” (T 267). The mind gets restless once the conflict is brought about, because a decision has to be made. Our judgement informs us that we cannot keep both identity and interruption without entangling ourselves in a contradiction and thereby compromising our philosophical endeavours. Since we cannot keep the idea of identity amongst perceptions “without reluctance”, we have to “turn to the other side” and disguise the interruption by resorting to the thesis of continued and independent existence of something that is not present to the mind (T 206).<sup>8</sup> We have here a conflict between our tendencies, just like the one we spotted in the preceding section. Such a conflict has to be overcome somehow. The tendencies have to be managed so as to allow a philosophical explanation of the origin of (O). Once this is acknowledged, it is reasonable to suppose a meta-level of reflection wherein we can find a proper ground for the handling of such a tension. We are actually pushed up to a level of investigation by means of which alone we can analyse the limitations and advantages of each of our tendencies in order to reach a middle

point between them and therefore to dislodge the tension. It is my belief that the faculty that carries out such a task is a kind of non-demonstrative reason. That is what I shall argue for in the following section.

### 3 Accommodating the Conflicting Tendencies of The Mind on the Meta-Level

We have learnt in the preceding sections that there has to be a faculty that guides the mind when tensions between other faculties start popping up. The understanding or 'the more permanent and general principles of the fancy' drives us into one direction (cf T 267 and 182), instincts or less general and more unstable principles of the fancy drive us into the opposite direction (cf T 225, cf also T 148). In the case of causation, this conflict comes about when we face the problem of distinguishing between accidental connections and cause-effect relations. As for the case of the continued and independent existence of objects, this conflict shows up when we realise that we cannot keep both the ideas of interruption and of identity.

In the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise* Hume acknowledges the apprehension that stems from the conflicts among the tendencies of the mind. The disorder of his faculties leads him "almost to despair" (T 264). On the one hand, he realises that the "memory, senses, and understanding" are based upon "the imagination" (T 265), which is responsible for our belief in causal relations as well as in (O). On the other hand, Hume also realises that it is not possible "for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe in the continu'd existence of matter" (T 266). Now, the senses display perceptions in perpetual flux and *ipso facto* no necessary connections or external objects. The principles of the association of ideas that are governed by the imagination generate the idea of necessary connection, which lies "merely in ourselves and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir'd by custom." This means that the continued and independent existence of objects is an illusion, like MacBeth's dagger. When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude that objects cannot exist apart from our perceptions. So arguments from instincts do not seem to suffice.

to argue for (O). However, arguments from instincts that are also assisted by the imagination show at the same time *that* and *how* we are incapable of disbelieving in the continued existence of objects. Custom fills in the gaps among the fragmentary materials that are given through the senses. This gives us the illusion of the continued existence of objects (cf T 195 ff). It seems, then, that imagination makes us “embrace a manifest contradiction” (T 266).

We must disentangle this knot. We have learnt that demonstrative reason cannot act alone without entirely subverting itself (cf T 267). Our philosophical pretensions to justify (O) can never be fulfilled. Instincts are then called to our rescue. However, this does not satisfy Hume either. When we use arguments from instincts to explain our holding (O), and many other beliefs, we are led to the conclusion that personal identity, causal connection, the continued existence of unperceived objects, etc., are fictions of the mind or, as Hume says, products of the imagination. The question arises as to “how far we ought to yield to these illusions.” If we follow “every trivial suggestion of the fancy,” we are led into “errors, absurdities, and obscurities” (T 267).

The oscillation does not end here. If we thoroughly renounce those “refin’d or elaborate” reasonings, we may risk cutting off “entirely all science and philosophy.” At the same time though, we know that “reflections very refin’d and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us . . .” (T 268). The only thing that can dissipate these clouds is common life. For how long, though? We may be inclined to throw all “books and papers into the fire” (T 269), or “commit” them “to the flames” (E §132). Nevertheless, Hume knows that to seek refuge in common life is not a solution to, but rather a distraction from, our philosophical perplexity (cf Bell and McGinn 1990, p. 404). After a stroll along the river, after playing back gammon with friends he turns back to investigate the moral principles of good and evil or the cause of passions and inclinations.

Hume brings out the tension between the more permanent and universal principles of the mind (reflection) and the more trivial functions of the imagination (instincts). He knows that he simply cannot explain how one set of beliefs can be warranted in preference to another, given that neither is rationally demonstrable and both are

equally natural. Actually, the mind is in an endless battle with itself. It keeps bouncing from one tendency to another, never knowing where to stop. Each of those tendencies has a bias to go alone in the enterprise and to leave the other behind. However, when they act alone they take us nowhere. Instincts by themselves are unsatisfactory for explaining our belief formation, but reflection alone is not satisfactory either (cf Passmore 1968, p. 149).

In a recent article, Barry Stroud claims that the acknowledgement of the battle between the more refined and established reasonings and instincts is actually one of Hume's greatest contributions to philosophy (cf Stroud 1991). On the one hand, Hume points out the tendency of demonstrative reason to produce a philosophical despair that can only be resolved by means of instincts. On the other hand, the latter by itself, without the assistance of a 'refined reasoning', leads us to absurdities. Now, Stroud continues, since the idea of going back to despair is unacceptable, what is left is to accommodate our tendencies so as to reach "a happy 'determination' in which no side of our nature *draws* too much". In this way, Hume's standpoint is rendered clearer and its importance adequately established. The "pursuit of the sceptical philosophy is the best way of giving adequate expression to all the tendencies or propensities that constitute human nature" (Stroud 1991, p. 287).

Stroud's account seems correct to me. It points to the idea that the acknowledgement of the tension among our tendencies is just a preliminary step in the process towards mastering them. They should be put to work together. Once they are properly coordinated, they can assist each other. However, I think that his account does not carry us further. It remains to be explained *how* Hume's sceptical philosophy keeps the balance between our tendencies. I hold that the answer is found in a second-order reflection that regulates them. So, to stop us from getting entangled in radical scepticism, for example, we reason in the following way. In the course of our experience, we are occasionally tormented by questions that force us to go beyond appearances. We realise that, the more we employ demonstrative reason to answer these questions, the more we land in abstract and obscure investigations that have little or no import in our lives and that render us incapable of preventing doubts from piling up (cf

T 184) Because of this, we turn to our natural instincts. By the same token, to stop ourselves from falling prey to the superstitions of common sense, we should reason in the following way. The indiscriminate use of our instincts entails the impossibility of discerning truth from falsehood. So we have to ask for the assistance of the refined reasonings. Hume is keen to suggest that the unreflective reliance on our instincts drives us into superstition (cf E §130). According to him, superstition arises when we use our imagination indiscriminately, i.e., when we abandon ourselves to our instincts without taking account of more elaborate reflections. Superstition increases our fear and ignorance and incites our minds to follow our natural propensities without control (Cf E, §40). Hume invites us to adopt sceptical philosophy because it allows us to reach "accurate and just reasoning" as the "only catholic remedy (!)" to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon" (E §7). The plain man who does not acknowledge the role of the more established and general principles of the mind and who does not refine his instincts through a careful investigation is permanently subject to superstition.

Hume's philosophy is designed to prevent us from getting stuck in either abstruse philosophy or superstition. It traces a middle route along which the science of man can be constructed. It is the only option left to avoid our bowing to either instincts, or refined, abstract reasonings *completely* and *unreservedly*. But how can that be done? Hume contends that 'we are bound to hold that ...', or 'we decide that ...' a certain course of reasoning is the best available to provide a suitable solution to a philosophical problem. "We ought", Hume says, "to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable" (T 271). In this way, in order to avoid the abstruse philosophy, a decision has to be reached, to wit, we must appeal to our instincts and chase away any pretension of demonstrative reason to yield knowledge. Our instincts are brought onto the scene not because they insinuate themselves and constrain demonstrative reason, but rather because we ponder, reflect and reach the conclusion that neither of the two tendencies, when it is employed alone, can explain our holding (O).

In this process, we have to weigh the pros and cons of different choices. But this can be done only through a kind of second order

reflection. When we say 'we are bound to', we presuppose that some rule or principle prescribes to us to do so and so. When we say 'we decide', we presuppose that a certain philosophical explanation justifies such a decision. What is it then, that grounds our decisions to keep the balance between abstract reasoning and our instincts? I believe the answer is as follows. Second order arguments are elaborated by means of a set of rules or principles that function normatively for the tendencies of human nature. They regulate our instincts as well as our refined reflections. So the missing element that would turn the plain man into a mitigated sceptic is the application of an argument, or set of arguments, that operates on the meta level over his first-order arguments.

It is important to distinguish those rules from the general rules mentioned in section 1. The latter regulate associations between ideas and impressions so as to allow us to draw causal inferences. The rules or principles that give support to second order arguments, however, regulate the several tendencies or propensities of human nature, by means of these, the mitigated sceptic establishes his standpoint. For example, to justify his belief in (O) (or his belief in causality, personal identity, etc.), the mitigated sceptic resorts to the principle 'since demonstrative reason is incapable of justifying (O), we must turn to our understanding and our instincts (in an oblique way)'. In turn, to instruct us to evaluate and correct our natural tendencies, the mitigated sceptic resorts to the principle 'since our instincts and our senses by themselves drive us into error, we need the intervention of refined reflection'. Hume states this principle when he comments on the limitations of our instincts

in order to pave the way for such a sentiment [internal feeling], and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distinct comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained (*Principles of Morals*, 137)

These are principles that regulate not our perceptions, but our faculties. They govern the whole activity of the mind, preventing it from going astray. It should also be emphasised that the princi

ples found in second-order arguments are quite different from the abstruse philosopher's self-certifying first principles. Hume makes it clear that, since they stem from quite abstract notions, the latter principles end up isolating us "from communication with mankind", so that they "contribute nothing either to advantage or pleasure of society" (E §4). In turn, since they stem from the attempt to reconcile the tendencies of human nature, second order principles can be of good use for the progress of mankind insofar as they aid the development of science and philosophy.

The key to understanding the status of those principles, as well as this second order level of reflection, is to pinpoint the faculty that lies behind these conflicts and that is responsible for the co-ordination of the different tendencies of the mind. Is such a coordination founded on instincts? I do not think so. Hume cannot be viewed as contending that we are *naturally inclined* to go back to our instincts in order to prevent demonstrative reason from taking over and at the same time to go back to the latter in order to prevent the former from leading us into error. This is tantamount to holding that human nature is such that we are naturally inclined to be mitigated sceptics. Clearly, this collides with Hume's attempt to construct a philosophical posture that is exempt from the superstitions of common sense. As Stroud suggests, the "blissful peasant who never felt or was moved by anxiety about his lack of understanding of the way things are would not lead a sceptical life, however blindly and calmly he was carried along by his natural instincts" (Stroud 1991, p. 283). The mitigated sceptic needs the intervention of reflection to determine whether instincts are guiding him on the right path or not.

Apparently contradicting what I have just said, though, Hume states in a celebrated passage that "nature has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel." So is it not the case that we are naturally inclined to be mitigated sceptics, after all? I do not think so. In the context of this passage, Hume is struggling to distinguish himself from the radical sceptics, "who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgement is not in *any* thing possess of *any* measure of truth and falsehood." To oppose this view, he does resort to nature, but in a way that "any other person" does in order to realise that scepticism of that kind is "entirely superfluous", for nobody can be 'sincerely



and constantly of that opinion" (T 183) Our faculties are so constituted that radical scepticism is dismissable from the very start We are naturally determined, or hardwired, as it were, to acquire beliefs in certain circumstances I am here in agreement with Passmore, who states that "the 'Nature' which intervenes is simply *our own nature*, which is incapable of taking sceptical arguments with any seriousness"<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, Passmore continues, "Hume was not, in the full sense, a naturalist He nowhere suggests that causality must be reliable *because it rests upon instinct*" (1968, p 146) And if reason is sometimes referred to as a species of instinct, it should be emphasised that, as any other instinct, it "may be fallacious or deceitful" (E §127) Hence, instinct alone "cannot save us from [total] scepticism" (Passmore 1968, p 147) We can be rescued from sceptical despair only because we have the faculties we do So, the appeal to 'Nature' in this context, for example, is fully compatible with Descartes's view that our very constitution allows us to hold certain beliefs Descartes makes it clear in the Sixth Meditation that our nature is such that body and mind are conjoined and this teaches us about the external objects surrounding us

At this point, it is easy to understand what the abstruse philosopher's error consists in He is wrong in taking the challenge of radical scepticism seriously and in trying dogmatically to devise rational proofs for the truth of this or that belief, completely apart from the other tendencies of human nature In turn, the mitigated sceptic can easily disregard such proofs by pointing to the practical impossibility of holding radical scepticism Now this is not the same as to hold that we are naturally inclined to be mitigated sceptics, it means merely that mitigated scepticism conforms to our natural propensities in a way that radical scepticism does not Mitigated scepticism is beneficial to mankind in that it limits "our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding" (E §130) It is a viewpoint that is not naturally acquired, otherwise the plain man would be unavoidably its adherent

If instinct does not govern second-order reflections, and if experience is based upon it, there follows that experience cannot be thought of as providing the basis of this line of argument, either This also implies that Hume cannot be classed as an empiricist in the full

sense. Actually, he insists that the senses can never assure us of the continued existence of external objects, owing to the fact that all we have access to are fleeting perceptions. So experience alone cannot justify (O). This is quite foreign to what a full empiricist like Locke claims. According to him, the “*knowledge of the Existence of any other thing we can have only by Sensation*” (*Essay*, p. 630). For example, “whilst I write this, I have, by the Paper affecting my Eyes, that Idea produced in my Mind by which I know that that Quality doth really exist, and hath a Being, without me. And of this, the greatest assurance I can possibly have, and to which my Faculties can attain, in the Testimony of my Eyes” (*ibid.*, p. 631).

We already know that Cartesian rationalism, or rationalism in its purest form, does not lead us very far, for demonstrative reason ends up swallowing itself. Cartesian reason may make promises but, at the end of the day, it just does not deliver. It seems that we have been driven into a dead-end. Hume cannot be a naturalist, or an empiricist or a Cartesian rationalist. This is the great difficulty we approach when we read Hume, a difficulty so brilliantly dramatised by him in his celebrated expression of despair at the end of Book I of the *Treatise*. What is it then, that lies behind the wheel of our tendencies, telling us to follow this or that path? Well, second-order arguments are constructed by means of certain principles and general guidelines, on the basis of which the mind ascertains the right course of thinking so as to avoid unpalatable outcomes (e.g., superstition, abstruse thinking, etc.). This whole procedure must be thought of as *logically preceding* empirical knowledge, in that it instructs us how to reflect properly so as to yield it. In this sense, it is plausible to state that the procedure at issue is *a priori* and not *a posteriori*. Unless we resort to it so as to rule and control our tendencies, no empirical knowledge will ever come about. On the one hand, we have seen that demonstrative reason has to be dismissed by appeal to instincts, otherwise we will be unable to explain our beliefs. On the other hand, we have also seen that, if we do not master our instincts by means of our power of judgement which “corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions”, we “could never think or talk steadily on any subject” (*Principles of Morals*, 185, cf. also T 603).

Now, I hold that the only suitable faculty left to do the job of

coordinating our tendencies is *reason*. This result seems baffling. As just shown, Hume is relentless in torpedoing reason (cf also Biro 1993, p. 44). How is it possible then, to reinstall reason in Hume's system? The answer is we should understand the term 'reason' here as non-demonstrative.<sup>10</sup> Reason is not demonstrative in this context because it does not elaborate proofs. It does not draw consequences from self-evident principles established by perceiving mere relations of ideas. It is in the latter sense only that reason is said by Hume to be destructive and therefore to be left aside. Rather, the sense of 'reason' I have in mind here is the human capacity that examines the workings of our tendencies, i.e., the transitions of ideas they establish, and considers where each inference can get us to. It compares those inferences and steers our judgments when conflicts arise.<sup>11</sup> It helps the understanding to restrain our instincts, and it restores them to do what demonstrative reason has been shown to be incapable of doing (viz., leading to beliefs). As Wright asserts, although Hume rejects the Cartesian view that "reason alone can serve as a foundation for the sciences, he did give reason a role in the correction of natural judgements and inferences" (Wright 1983, p. 230, cf *ibid.*, p. 246).

The use of the term 'reason' in this sense is not arbitrary. It is licensed by Hume himself. Actually, seeing this helps us to understand a number of passages in Hume's works where reason is referred to in a non-derogatory way. As a consequence, it allows us to ensure the harmony of Hume's system in that it eliminates any apparent inconsistency between those passages and Hume's attack on demonstrative reason. For example, in discussing the limitations of the senses as a final judge of our enquiries, he states that they "alone are not implicitly to be depended on", so that "we must correct their evidence by reason" (E §117). In commenting on the connection between natural and moral obligations, he says "tho' I have all along endeavour'd to establish my system on pure reason, and have scarce ever cited the judgment even of philosophers or historians on any article, I shou'd now appeal to popular authority, and oppose the sentiments of the rabble to any philosophical reasoning" (T 546). By the same token, after comparing our natural abilities with moral virtues, he ends up stating that men "are superior to beasts principally by the superiority of their reason". All the advantages of art are owing to human

reason" (T 610) But I believe the closest description of the role of reason as a co ordinator given by Hume is found in the *Principles of Morals*, when he starts his account of moral praise

its evident that *reason* must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind [moral praise], since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor. In many cases this is an affair liable to great controversy doubts may arise, opposite interests may occur, and a preference must be given to one side, from very nice views, and a small overbalance of utility (*Principles of Morals*, p. 285)

Although the context of this passage is moral and not epistemological, it is possible to identify some features of 'reason' along the lines I have just argued for. Hume can be referring to neither demonstrative nor what is nowadays called experimental reason. We have shown that according to Hume, the former leads us into absurdities. As for the latter, we have seen that he often uses another term to refer to the faculty which carries out experimental reasoning, to wit, 'the understanding' (cf Fogelin 1993, p. 101). Besides, experimental reason yields judgments about things in the world in their causal relations, while in the passage above, reason seems to be doing a different job: it instructs us 'in the tendency of qualities and actions', and when 'opposite interests' show up, it decides to give a preference to one side' (cf Nuyen 1988, p. 380).

It might be objected that my viewpoint clashes with some passages in Hume's works where reason is referred to as "the slave of passions" (T 415). As I see it, though, in those contexts "reason" has to do with any relation or transition from one belief to another. It is "nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities" (T 179). From this perspective animals themselves are endowed with reason. Understood in this sense, reason is and ought to be the slave of passions.

At this stage, I believe it is worth bringing Baier's approach into the debate. She claims that, after criticising the rationalist, solitary reason that acts on its own without paying attention to the other faculties of human nature, Hume introduces "a transformed reason" that

is “accompanied by other abilities and virtues”, and that is answerable to the “shared moral sentiment” (Baier 1991, p 280) Actually, Hume himself points out that, where “reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to” (T 270) She goes on to contend that reason “in its new guise is the power of judgement, along with the aids we judge helpful for judgement These include some general rules, especially rules of inference, and include also the habits and customs that support and nurture our best powers of judgement and inference” (Baier 1991, p 282) She comes very close to my viewpoint when she states that the “selection between different versions of reason , is made by ‘reflection’ The final arbiter is reflection both in the wide sense, in which it is simply sustained attention, and in the strict narrow sense, in which it is the turn of a faculty or movement of mind back onto itself” (Baier 1991, p 284)

My view, though, is not quite this First, as I interpret it, the mixed reason alluded to by Hume is not another capacity that results from the gathering together of our propensities Reason continues to regulate our investigations The difference is that Humean reason, unlike the Cartesian, handles and coordinates a richer set of elements It is responsible for our decisions of both taking instincts into consideration *vis-a-vis* demonstrative reason and of curbing instincts to keep us away from superstition Second, I hold that reason as a meta level arbiter is answerable only to itself and not, as Baier asserts, to any other propensities of human nature Customs that “support and nurture our best powers of judgement and inference” are, rather, the ingredients that are handled and regulated by reason so as to optimise our enquiries The arbiter, I take it, is also the legislator Third, although I may agree with her that this reason can also be called the power of judgement, I cannot see a ‘new’ reason being propounded here, but the same old reason, solitary because it depends upon nothing but itself, although tolerant of faculties other than itself, as long as they remain subordinated to the authority of its principles and rules Finally, as regards her assertion that reflection is the ultimate arbiter, I gather she is here referring to the very legislative reason I am talking about, for reason is the only faculty we have that is capable of laying its eyes on itself to judge its own

achievements

This interpretation finds echo in the passage in the *Treatise* where Hume expounds the consequences of rejecting refined reasonings. "If we embrace this principle", he states, "and condemn all refin'd reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all" (T 268). Reason is referred to as false here because it ends up violating one of its own maxims, namely 'never act alone'. In order to hear its own principles and rules and thereby to hold sway over the different tendencies of human nature, it must act in solitude. The major difference between Humean and Cartesian solitary reason has to do with the fact that, in its seclusion, the former, unlike the latter, investigates not only itself, but all other tendencies and considers their role in the formation of our beliefs.

#### 4 The Status of Hume's Scepticism

Once the role of reason understood as the co-ordinator and arbiter of our tendencies is highlighted, the status and scope of Hume's mitigated scepticism can be properly established. If reason is still around, to begin with, Hume cannot be mistaken for a Pyrrhonian. Sextus Empiricus makes it clear that the sceptic turns his back on reflection in order to embrace phenomena. More precisely, the sceptic, after observing the conflicts in Philosophy and developing the ability to produce antitheses to given theses, begins to suspect all philosophical explanation. On that score, he suspends judgement in order to reach peace of mind (cf *Outlines*, p. 7). Hume, in turn, never advocates suspension of judgement. On the contrary, he thinks that, "were his [the Pyrrhonian sceptic's] principles universally and steadily to prevail, all action would immediately cease, and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence" (E §128). Of course Hume misreads Sextus here. After suspending judgement, the Pyrrhonian sceptic lives a normal and happy life following his instincts and obeying the laws of his community (cf *Outlines*, p. 13). But this is just a minor point. The fact of the matter is that, thanks to the introduction of second

order arguments, Hume believes that we can discipline our mind and prevent it from getting out of control in the hands of the dogmatist.

Second, Hume is neither a negative nor a positive dogmatist. It is true that demonstrative reason is destructive, but he never avers categorically that a philosophy founded on it is utterly useless. In commenting on the fate of the abstruse philosophy, he suggests that to “throw up at once all pretensions of this kind may justly be more rash, precipitate, and dogmatical than even the boldest and most affirmative philosophy” (E §9). As for positive dogmatism, Hume is keen to condemn it. We had better abandon the project of constituting the most abstract philosophy and start “reasoning in this easy manner” that results from the combination of “profound enquiry with clearness” (E §10). Philosophy should be made in a “careless manner,” and the mitigated sceptic should be “diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction” (T 273).

What to say about Cartesian scepticism, or the scepticism we find in Descartes’ First Meditation? Waxman holds that Hume’s scepticism is precisely of this kind. He contends that mitigated scepticism stems from “a clash between two kinds of *equally natural and irresistible belief*—one founded on the senses—and the other on imagination.” The senses, for example, inform us that the objects we find in perception are continuous and independent of us. Imagination, however, shows that this belief is just a creation of the mind. This granted, it seems that “our natures condemn us, without possibility of reprieve, to know the falsehood of that which we are powerless to disbelieve, and what is this if not the Cartesian nightmare come true?” (Waxman 1994, p. 268). We must then acknowledge the fact that “there is in Hume a kind of natural dialectic no less irresolvable than that attributed to reason by Kant” (*ibid.*, p. 269).

I cannot concur with Waxman on this issue. His view is based upon the idea that immediate consciousness produces beliefs that clash with those produced by the imagination. We have seen, though, that only causal reasoning, which is based upon custom, can produce beliefs. Now, even if we grant the clash between the two sorts of beliefs that stem from the imagination at the end of the day, we can reconcile them through second order arguments. With Hume, we can argue, for example, that, although the senses inform us that the

object immediately present to consciousness is not continuous, distinct and independent of us in opposition to the results of associative imagination, they are not to be trusted implicitly and must be regulated by reflection. This reasoning suffices to water down the alleged clash pointed out by Waxman.

Well, it is time we determined whether Hume is indeed a sceptic. From what has been said, he cannot be. He employs the tools of scepticism as a scaffolding for his overall project of accommodating the tendencies of human nature so as to constitute the science of man. But how should we interpret his proposal of a mitigated scepticism? What does he really mean by that? Simply put, Hume must be taken as contending that, to undermine the edifice of traditional metaphysics or the abstruse philosophy, we must learn with the sceptic to raise doubts regarding its foundations. However, the science of man, since it is thought of as being "built on foundation almost entirely new", has to be regarded as exempt from them. If this is granted, earlier philosophical systems can be cast off without further ado. Thanks to the application of second order arguments, Hume can say to the Cartesian rationalist, for example, that he overstates the powers of demonstrative reason and thereby gets entangled in profound and obscure reasonings. To a full empiricist, he can say that experience alone does not give rise to our belief in the continued and independent existence of external objects. Finally, to the naturalist, he can reply that we are not better off because custom and not reason is the source of our beliefs. As any instinct, custom is fallible and must be supervised by reason. To blindly follow it is to condemn our investigations to a total failure.

Why is it then, that he calls himself a (mitigated) sceptic? Does that not contradict my thesis? I do not believe so. Hume must be seen as adopting a sceptical procedure directly towards any philosophical enterprise that favours one of the two tendencies — namely demonstrative reason and instincts — over the other. He advises us to *suspect* either of them when it tries to take the lead and run over the other. When this occurs, he instructs us to strengthen the tendency momentarily left behind. Only in so doing can we keep the balance between these tendencies and so think straight. Above all, he prescribes following this or that tendency only to a certain point.



In conclusion, mitigated scepticism is a label that refers to a preliminary procedure that must be adopted by anyone who wishes to dedicate himself "to the study of philosophy" and to preserve "a proper impartiality in judgements" (E §116). This procedure paves the way to the science of man. In a clear anticipation of Kant's overall philosophical project, it is a prolegomenon to any future metaphysics that wishes to turn into a science.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of the strongest proponents of this interpretation is Kemp Smith. He claims for example that "Hume's philosophy is not fundamentally sceptical, it is naturalistic in tendency" (Smith 1941, p. 155, cf. also Strawson 1985). More recently, Waxman argues that Hume's philosophy is not only a form of naturalism, but that nonetheless countenances an extreme sort of scepticism (cf. Waxman 1994, pp. 266 ff).

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that after Quine the term 'naturalism' has been given a different meaning. According to him, on the foundationalist view, epistemology must be developed independently of, and prior to, science. Quine rejects this approach and holds that epistemology should, rather, be considered just a branch of natural science. Whereas Hume calls his philosophy 'the science of man', one might be tempted to consider his strategy along the same lines. I believe, however, that Hume cannot be classed as a naturalist in this contemporary sense, either. He makes it clear that the (philosophical) study of human nature he intends to develop is antecedent to natural science and, if successful, will have the effect of reforming all other sciences. On that score, the expression 'the science of man' is best interpreted as referring to the study of our faculties that are responsible for the making of all other sciences. That is why he also calls such a study 'the knowledge of man', to which all other knowledge inevitably turns at the end of the day (cf. T XV).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Enquiry* §31. It is true that Hume sometimes asserts that reflection can produce belief from a single experiment. Nevertheless, he also reminds us that this can only be carried out under the presupposition that the principle

of the uniformity of nature holds fast. In this way, although “the connexion of the ideas is not habitual after one experiment, this connexion is comprehended under another principle, that is habitual” (T 105, cf T 158–9)

<sup>4</sup> Cf *Enquiry* §§46–7 and T 130 ff

<sup>5</sup> Vanterpool and Beck are among those who give indications of the demonstrative character of arguments elaborated on the basis of these general rules. Vanterpool points out that the rules in question “function as guides and correctives in moral matters” (Vanterpool 1974, p. 484). Beck, in turn, claims that those rules “function normatively as if they were a priori regulative” (Beck 1978, p. 123).

<sup>6</sup> Cf Bennett 1971 and Stroud 1977

<sup>7</sup> This is also Stroud’s opinion (cf Stroud 1977, p. 108)

<sup>8</sup> Although by means of a different argument, Kemp Smith and Stroud reached a similar conclusion (cf Smith 1949, p. 548 and Stroud 1977, p. 108)

<sup>9</sup> Passmore 1968, p. 147. Of course Passmore is referring to radical scepticism.

<sup>10</sup> As Capaldi states, according to Hume, “reason does not operate solely in terms of the rationalist model, so we have to have broader conception of reason” (Capaldi 1975, p. 34)

<sup>11</sup> A similar description of the role of reason in this sense can be found in Nuyen 1988, p. 378