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# HOW DISTURBED WAS HUME BY HIS OWN SKEPTICISM?

M. A. Box

*When a writer is skilful in destructive criticism, the public is satisfied with that. If he has no constructive philosophy, it is not demanded; and if he has, it is overlooked.*

— T. S. Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt"

*In the mind of a Hume one can watch at one's ease this superhuman balance of contrasting opposites—the questions of so profound a moment, the answers of so supreme a calm. And the same beautiful quality may be traced in the current of his life, in which the wisdom of philosophy so triumphantly interpenetrated the vicissitudes of the mortal lot.*

— Lytton Strachey, "Hume"

Pleas for moderation are disadvantaged in that they lack excitement. Nevertheless, they are often what the situation calls for. As everyone knows, David Hume maintained that reason cannot answer a number of questions many people have deemed rather pressing. Though many have tried to answer these questions, no consensus exists that anyone has succeeded, and so Hume is best known to us as the great skeptic who deflated philosophical optimism and fomented Counter-En-

lightenment irrationalism and modernist angst. The present question is just how disturbed Hume was by these skeptical doubts. The answer will be that, notwithstanding the reaction of posterity, he was not nearly so disturbed himself as is often supposed.

Presently among literary scholars, if decreasingly among philosophers, the prevailing image of Hume seems to be that he was cut to the quick by his own skeptical arguments. Most of the indications from his writings and biography are that Hume was a fairly well-balanced and happy man, but often this awkward fact is ignored, with the implicit explanation that so disturbed was he that he suppressed his doubts, suffering from "solipsistic fear," "literary loneliness," and other dreadful sounding psycho-pathological conditions.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, Hume wished to be a constructive empiricist but was actually a Pyrrhonist *malgré lui*. Although there is truth in this picture of Hume, I suggest that the picture is an exaggeration, much as distorting as if in describing Samuel Johnson's character we focused disproportionately on his fear of death and damnation.

Perhaps we are so accustomed to exploring the inner storms and stresses of writers that out of inertia we approach Hume likewise. True, there is good reason to believe that Hume did not rejoice in his skepticism. All the same, we would be hard put to find a more well-adjusted and sane genius. His skepticism appears in many forms and degrees, but the only form that can be said to have disturbed him appreciably is the dubiety of reason's efficacy in view of its dependence on certain unverifiable premises. We get startlingly different pictures of Hume if we compare two passages—one from the *Treatise* (London: 1739-40), the other from the *Enquiry con-*

<sup>1</sup> These diagnoses come, respectively, from A. D. Nuttall, *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 11, 92-111, where we find Hume prefiguring Romanticism and Paterian aestheticism, and John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 19-49, 215-25. Examples could be multiplied. In *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), John Mullan repeats the gloomy skepticism theme, speaking of the "dark fatalism of Hume's epistemological enquiry" (21). Mark A. Wolfberger says that Hume's skepticism caused "a necessary repression of the intolerable" that sends him into society for solace, establishing a pattern implicit with a "theory of repression" that Conrad would render in fiction and Freud would articulate (*Josiph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990], 112, 78).

cerning Human Understanding—in which he reacted to the dubiety of reason. In the *Treatise* he says, in uncharacteristically febrile prose,

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty. (I. iv. 7 / 268-9)<sup>2</sup>

Rampant reason—that is, reason unchecked by nature—short-circuits itself in its Pyrrhonian permutation, and results not, as the Pyrrhonists held, in ataraxic tranquility, but in debilitating dithering. Speaking in the *Enquiry* of the same topic, however, Hume makes light of such skepticism, telling us that this debilitating dithering is nothing to worry about. When a Pyrrhonist

awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these

<sup>2</sup> References to the *Treatise* (hereinafter abbreviated in citations as *THM*) will normally be to book, part, and section numbers, followed by a virgule and page numbers from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978).

operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them. (xii. 2 / 160)<sup>3</sup>

Which was the real Hume, the weeping or the laughing philosopher? Doubtless he was neither and he was both. He was a real person, and real people are complicated, evincing contradictory tendencies; otherwise they would not be the jest and riddle as well as the glory of the world. But if we were to choose which of the two he was preponderantly, we should conclude that he resembled Democritus more than he did Heraclitus. It rings true when Robert Adam's mother calls Hume "the Large Jolly Man" and "the most agreeable Facetious Man" she ever met.<sup>4</sup> Usually he was more inclined to laugh at than lament the feeble powers of man, with the added endearment that foremost in risibility for Hume was the philosopher and, therefore, Hume himself. The defeat of reason and mortification of philosophy is not disastrous if the victor is nature.



The present question is one of biographical fact as much as of philosophy, but either way one views it Hume emerges as a tolerably nappy man. Let us start with biographical fact. We are fortunate in that we know a great deal about his life. Three volumes' worth of letters and a great deal of testimony about him survive to us. Someone reading the letters in their entirety gets fairly well acquainted with the man, and one does not come away with an impression of so much as a hint of suppressed anxiety in him. When on occasion he was anxious or upset, as he was over his trouble with Rousseau, he generally let all of his friends know in tiresome detail what the matter was. There is almost no sign in the letters of worry over the force of skepticism. Examining his letters, we learn what really bothered him: the national debt; attacks on his moral

<sup>3</sup> References to what is now commonly called the first *Enquiry* (hereinafter abbreviated in citations as *EHU*) will be to section and part numbers, followed by a virgule and page numbers from *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). Originally it was published as *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (London: 1748).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Alexander Carlyle, *Anecdotes and Characters of the Times*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 139 (A. D. 1753).

character such as Rousseau's; captious receptions to his books, particularly the reception of the first volumes of his *History*; English arrogance towards Scots; and Wilkite agitations, which he feared would provoke a reaction against free expression. If any issue in intellectual life distressed Hume, it was more the "Whig interpretation of history" than skepticism.<sup>5</sup> By and large, the letters bear out Hume's description of himself in his autobiography as "being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine Temper."<sup>6</sup>

In only one letter, admittedly a remarkable and justifiably much-quoted one, is Hume's distress related to philosophy. This is the letter of 1734 addressed perhaps to Dr. George Cheyne, perhaps to Dr. Arbuthnot, perhaps never sent, in which Hume described at length the psychosomatic ailments he suffered in his late teens and early twenties.<sup>7</sup> So much has this letter been discussed that it has informally acquired the convenient name of Hume's Letter to a Physician. By itself the Letter yields no evidence of skepticism's having bothered Hume. Only in conjunction with section 7 of book 1, part 4 of the *Treatise* does the Letter suggest such a thing. The two do invite juxtaposition, however.

Before proceeding to examine the Letter in conjunction with the pertinent sections of the *Treatise*, we should note that only in these two places in his whole *oeuvre* will we find indications that skepticism troubled Hume. And here we find that the particular skeptical question troubling Hume was the dubiety of reason. Elsewhere Hume skeptically challenged every argument he could find supporting supernaturalist religion and the tenet that morality is an objective feature of the cosmos rather than a system of conventions derived from our subjective responses to events. But there is no indication that skepticism regarding these topics bothered him in the least. The possibilities that God is not in his heaven and that morality is not objectively fixed may have horrified Pascal and

<sup>5</sup> See Victor G. Wexler, *David Hume and the History of England, Memorials of the American Philosophical Society 131* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> "My Own Life," ms., rpt. in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), 1: 2. Hereinafter the *Letters* will be abbreviated in citations as LDH.

<sup>7</sup> See [Mar. or Apr. 1734,] LDH, 1: 12-18, and, for background, Ernest Campbell Mossner, "Hume's Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, 1734: the Biographical Significance," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 7 (1944): 135-52.

T. S. Eliot, but not Hume. The question of personal identity is often thought to have disturbed Hume, but recent interpretations of his theory indicate that he was simply attacking Cartesian tenets concerning identity, not lamenting the discovery that he had no self.<sup>4</sup> His indecision between naive realism, representative realism, and skeptical impasse appears in his writings only as illustration of natural limitations on our ratiocinative capabilities, so the problem of external reality resolves itself into the larger one of the dubiety of reason's efficacy. The same is true of the discussions of induction and causal connection. The only skeptical topic that disturbed Hume was the dubiety of reason's efficacy; and the only places in which Hume represented that question as disturbing, in an *oeuvre* so voluminous that he professed himself almost "ashamed to see his own bulk upon a Shelf," are the last section of book 1 of the *Treatise* and, by implication, the Letter to a Physician.

Understandably but unfortunately, this portion of the *Treatise* has unduly dominated our view of Hume. One prominent book will have to suffice for illustration. A good book emphasizing the distress caused Hume by the challenge of skepticism is John Sitter's *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eight-*

<sup>4</sup> For example, Philip Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics: A Study of the Relationship between Sympathy and Morality with Special Reference to Hume's "Treatise"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 30. J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge, 1980), 159-60 n1. Don Garren, "Hume's Self-Doubts about Personal Identity," *Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 337-58. As a commentator for the session, "Recent Books on Hume: *The Swasize Art of David Hume*" (18th annual conference of the Hume Society, University of Oregon, Eugene, July 1991), Richard Watson adduced Hume's theoretical difficulties with personal identity as indicating a *crise Pyrrhonienne*. This was by way of showing how in my book I had underplayed Hume's skepticism. To be brief, in the *Treatise* Hume premises his passionnal psychology, and thereby also his sentimentalist moral theory, on our having a sense of self (II i 11 / 317), so plainly he saw as compatible with a sane, moral life the tenet that the self is a succession of perceptions connected causally. The problem he candidly identifies in the appendix is that he cannot account for how the successive perceptions acquire their impressions of causal connection to each other. Somehow the mind bundles its perceptions and pulls itself together, so to speak. Of this he has no doubt, though the mechanism eludes him: "Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis" that will explain the process (636). One must contrive to read such a hopeful conclusion ironically to make it compatible with Pyrrhonism, and due caution requires us to consider that, though a consummate ironist, sometimes Hume simply meant what he said.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle, in the Collection of Lt. Colonel Ralph Hryward Isham*, ed. Geoffrey Scott and Frederick Pottle, 18 vols. (New York: privately printed, 1928-34), I: 129.

eenth-Century England, winner of the 1983 Louis Gottschalk Prize. Not the least of the strengths of this book is that Sitter draws attention to possible weaknesses in his own case. In arguing that trouble in establishing a basis for rational belief resulted in Hume's literary loneliness in the *Treatise*, from which Hume fled in subsequent works to less solipsistically slippery slopes and more publicly verifiable phenomena, Sitter admits that instances of Hume's overt distress are not common, even in the *Treatise*: "It must be conceded at once...that these melodramatic moments are not entirely typical and that we have been concentrating on the more conspicuously autobiographical sections and ignoring most of the book." Nevertheless Sitter finds it significant, in view of the atypical moment of neo-Pyrrhonian consternation, that the "silent solitude of Hume's chamber is one of the more vivid 'impressions' throughout the *Treatise*," and he asserts, in patent exaggeration, that the "chamber and the moment are the boundaries of Hume's experience as a writer." Whereas, according to Sitter, the literary world of Locke's *Essay* is the "clubbable" conversation of the friends Locke mentioned in his introductory epistle, the world of the *Treatise* is that of a man meditating in isolation from any auditors.<sup>10</sup> But Hume's references to his chamber cease when he leaves book 1 of the *Treatise*, in which, after all, he was expounding an empiricist account of perception by way of establishing his laws of mind. Surely the nature of the endeavor is sufficient to explain Hume's practice of illustrating points with references to his own perceptual world. These illustrations are reported dispassionately and, by themselves, do not suggest loneliness.

It is only in light of the histrionics at the end of book 1 and of the distress recorded in the Letter to a Physician that these illustrations might suggest a sense of isolation, and we should balance this picture by reviewing some biographical facts that are frequently ignored. From a letter of 1735 we know that in La Fleche, where Hume composed much of the *Treatise*, his practice was to spend more than half of his day in study.<sup>11</sup> On

<sup>10</sup> *Literary Loneliness*, 30, 23-4. As a matter of biographical fact, Hume was by universal report exceedingly clubbable and gregarious. See, for example, Carlyle, *Anecdotes*, 141 *et passim*, and Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), ch. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest C. Mossner, "Hume at La Fleche, 1735: An Unpublished Letter," *Texas Studies in English* 37 (1958): 32.



the other hand, Hume's argument against the credibility of testimony concerning miracles, originally included in the *Treatise*, was born not of solitary meditation, but of a conversation. As Hume informed George Campbell,

I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College of La Fleche... and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;—which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer. (*LDH*, 1: 361)

The world of the *Treatise* looks here less like a solipsistic soliloquy in an isolated chamber than a congenial contest of wits. We know that before going to La Fleche Hume stayed in Paris with the Chevalier Ramsay, whose persistence in challenging Hume's theories sated even Hume's appetite for argument.<sup>12</sup> From Paris, Hume went to Rheims, where he worked on the *Treatise* but also spent a part of "every Day" in the homes of the best families in town. "[T]hey make Parties of Diversion to show me more Company," he wrote to a friend (*LDH*, 1: 22). Seven months after the publication of book 3 of the *Treatise*, William Mure of Caldwell described Hume as follows.

[H]e is a very sensible fellow... As he is very communicative of all his knowledge we have a great deal from him in the way of dispute and argument... [W]e reason upon every point with the greatest freedom[;] even his own books... we canvass with ease, and attack him boldly

<sup>12</sup> See Hume's letter to Michael Ramsay of 26 Aug. 1737 in Tadeusz Kozanecki, "Dawida Hume'a Nieznane Listy W Zbiorach Muzeum Czartoryskich (Polska)," *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 9 (1963): 133; rpt. in Mossner, *Life*, 626-7 (see also 93-6).

wherever we can get the least hold of him, and question and contradict his most favourite notions; all this goes on with the greatest good humour, and affords us entertainment.

The picture of Hume emerging from these biographical facts accords with what the reviewers of the *Treatise* saw in the author. They did not find a voice crying out in the wilderness so much as an aggressive, cocky debater.<sup>13</sup> My own impression of the author in the *Treatise* is not predominantly of someone probing his solipsistic wounds and crying out in solitude; it is of someone keenly aware at all times of an imaginatively projected auditor constantly raising objections.

In the Letter to a Physician, however, we do get indications of psychological distemper. It is a description of a succession of ailments, perhaps entirely psychosomatic, occurring during the years in which the *Treatise* was in gestation and composition. Over the years described in the letter he suffered from energy loss, scurvy spots on his fingers, excessive expectoration, heart palpitations, and stomach wind due to a post-adolescent growth spurt that intensified his appetite. Hume did not himself link his ailments to dismay over his philosophical conclusions, but rather to overwork and to a course of character improvement in which he endeavored to fortify himself with "Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life" (*LDH*, 1: 14). Little as they have to do with skepticism, such meditative exercises could by themselves account for the psychosomatic ailments. But among the ailments, the energy loss, the "Coldness" or loss of "Ardor," is intriguing, for Hume distinguishes between it and a common depression. Possibly it is related to skepticism.

Hume said that "I felt no Uneasyness or Want of Spirits, when I laid aside my Book" and that "Tis a Weakness rather than a Lowness of Spirits which troubles me, & there seems to be as great a Difference betwixt my Distemper & common Vapors, as betwixt Vapors & Madness" (1: 13, 17). It consists simply in a frustrating inability to think through his problems

<sup>13</sup> Rpt. in Mossner, *Life*, 628-9.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion of the reviews in ch. 2, §3 of the present writer's *Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Mossner, "The Continental Reception of Hume's *Treatise*, 1739-1741," *Mind* 56 (1947): 31-43.

sufficiently to expound them elegantly and neatly (1: 16-17). This weakness of spirits occurs only while he is philosophizing or writing (that is, philosophizing on paper). He found that he "was not able to follow out any Train of Thought, by one continued Stretch of View, but by repeated Interruptions, & by refreshing [his] Eye from Time to Time upon other Objects" (1: 16). He could make progress only through intermittent efforts, punctuated with diversions. His practice, accordingly, evolved so that he "studied moderately, & only when [he] found [his] Spirits at their highest Pitch, leaving off before [he] was weary, & trifling away the rest of [his] Time in the best manner [he] could" (1: 14-15). One is forcibly reminded here of the neo-Pyrrhonian portion of the *Treatise*, in which Hume described a cycle of intense cogitation leading to skeptical disillusionment, thence to a diversion in which nature asserts control and restores common sense and good humor, and then to a renewed engagement in philosophy. Immediately following the heated description of neo-Pyrrhonian paralysis quoted earlier from the *Treatise*, Hume shifts with stunning abruptness to perfectly tranquil tones:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (1. iv. 7 / 269)<sup>15</sup>

The similarity between the diversions described here and the therapeutic "trifling away" of his time described in the Letter are too close to be dismissed.

<sup>15</sup> With these starkly incongruous consecutive paragraphs in mind, Nuttall infers that Hume suffered from "a kind of schizophrenia" (*Common Sky*, 105). It seems more plausible that the incongruity was deliberate on Hume's part and that the effect on readers was supposed to be mild amusement at the author's expense. See *Suasive Art*, ch. 2, §4.

In the *Treatise*, if not in the Letter, Hume is quite clear that the cause of his temporary disillusionment with philosophy is skepticism's apparent undermining of his confidence in reason. All the skeptical discussions of causal connection, the external world, and personal identity relate specifically to his conclusion that reasoning is premised upon beliefs that reason cannot validate. This is what disturbs Hume, when he is disturbed. So when in the Letter Hume describes his "Coldness," one must wonder whether he is describing the reaction to skepticism he describes in the *Treatise*.

Most telling is the following description of his coldness:

[I]n reducing these [his notes] to Words, when one must bring the Idea he comprehended in gross, nearer to him, so as to contemplate its minutest Parts, & keep it stedily in his Eye, so as to copy these Parts in Order, this I found impracticable for me, nor were my Spirits equal to so severe an Employment. (*LDH*, 1: 16)

In this passage we are at the intersection of Hume's philosophy and his literary values: the two are indistinguishable here in the buttressing of his neo-Attic ideals of order and clarity by the empirical way of ideas that, theoretically, should have guaranteed that order and clarity. Like most of his contemporaries, Hume subscribed to the Lockean notion that referring questions to their experiential origins in ideas (or impressions, as Hume would say) should remove the confusing encrustations of empty words and reveal nakedly as much of truth as humans are capable of descrying. It is a commonplace of philosophical history that Hume pushed the way of ideas to the point of skeptical meltdown. So when Hume speaks of his inability to contemplate his idea in its minutest parts, very possibly he is describing the failure of the way of ideas to yield him clarity and, thence, solutions to his problems. As Hume said in the *Treatise*, nature "has sometimes such an influence, that she can stop our progress, even in the midst of our most profound reflections, and keep us from running on with all the consequences of any philosophical opinion" (I. iv. 2 / 214). In the Letter, therefore, Hume seems to be talking about the stage of empiricism at which skeptical deadlock occurs, although he describes the problem there as if the deadlock is due to his own state of mind rather than his radical empiricism. Even though in "My Own Life" he attributed the ailments of his

youth to "ardent Application" (*LDH*, 1: 1), not to skepticism, one should be willing to see in the background of the Letter an empiricism so extreme as to amount to skepticism.

Even ignoring the Letter, one must concede that the passages in the *Treatise* establish that to some extent and at some time neo-Pyrrhonian skepticism disturbed Hume. But we can recognize this and still not make *le bon David* into a neurasthenic proto-deconstructionist. Let us sum up the biographical considerations before moving on to philosophical ones. Only in one letter among hundreds surviving to us, and only fitfully at the end of the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume's first work, does Hume evince distress over skepticism. In the Letter what is supposed to be a *crise Pyrrhonnienne* turns out to be a nervous disorder in which skepticism was only one component. It would seem that unless Hume effectively suppressed his distress for most of his adult life, his distress was confined to his late adolescence and young adulthood, a time when, notoriously, people romanticize themselves and aggrandize their concerns—especially people in the throes of composition.

The appearances of distress in the *Treatise* are accurately described as fitful because, when it does appear, Hume is careful to notify us that he is expressing the mood of the moment, "the sentiments of my spleen and indolence,"<sup>16</sup> as he says. There is no space here to go into the artistic distance between Hume the reporter of Pyrrhonian distress and Hume the sufferer of it. Suffice it to say that that distance and the irony with which he describes his own state of mind effectively undercut our sense of his suffering. Plainly this is an overflow of emotion recollected very much in tranquility and with a sense of humor. Even if we read his literary depictions of splenetic fits as humorless, the question remains whether Hume was in his life unusually given to fits or made indecisive by skepticism. If he was, the fact eluded Adam Smith, who, after a friendship of at least twenty-four years, wrote that Hume's temper "seemed to be more happily balanced than that of any other man I have ever known." Smith goes on to speak of "the firmness of his mind" and "the steadiness of his resolutions" (*LDH*, 2: 452). Boswell, a genuine splenetic devoutly

<sup>16</sup> *THN*, I (iv. 7 / 270; see. iv. 2 / 217).

wishing that secretly Hume was disturbed by skepticism, was unable to report that such was the case.



*JACK. [after some hesitation] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.*

*LADY BRACKNELL. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance.*

*— Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest*

Let us now pass on to the philosophical implications for Hume of his skepticism. If we place the skeptical portions of the *Treatise* within their contexts, we find that, except fitfully and for dramatic purposes, the ultimate point of the discussions is empiricist and naturalist rather than skeptical. In the introduction Hume described his purpose as constructive, "to explain the principles of human nature" and on that foundation to build "a compleat system of the sciences" (xvi). He does not deplore the limits within which empiricism, and hence mankind, must work; rather he believes that his acknowledgement of them enhances the credibility of his system:

[T]ho' we must endeavour to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, 'tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical. (xvii)

Readers should not and will not worry about these limitations: "When we see, that we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented; tho' we be perfectly satisfied in the main of our ignorance, and perceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside our experience of their reality" (xviii). Some limit to what the mind can know is intrinsic to empiricism, according to which what we can ideate about is circumscribed by what human nature will allow us to experience. Within these limits, however, we can achieve remarkable things. In Newton's hands natural philosophy had made astonishing

progress within empirical limitations, and Hume thought that he could make similar advances in the "science of man." For example, within the limits of what is experienceable we are not going to learn much about supernatural entities like God, but this ignorance poses no genuine problem to mankind. The trouble arises entirely from people who suppose that they do know things about God and try to make others know the same things. On the other hand, within the limits of the experienceable we can establish, Hume believed, some natural laws by which the mind works.

This brings us to the second skeptical aspect of his preponderantly constructive philosophy. The first, which was intrinsic to the ideational limitations of empiricism, showed up possibly in the Letter to a Physician. The second aspect is implicit in Hume's naturalism, according to which mental activity is not a supernatural phenomenon and thence, like everything else in nature, must follow natural laws. As John Laird said long ago, the "thesis of Hume's general philosophy was simply that 'reason' took its place among other natural forces."<sup>17</sup>

There are two points to observe regarding the skeptical implications of naturalism. The first is that limitation is implicit in the concept of law. Laws are good things nevertheless. No one repines that the law of gravity will not be suspended and the planets fly out of orbit. Likewise it is on balance good that the mind cannot break the laws of its nature. If the mind cannot break these laws, it is limited to working within those laws, but to say that it can work only in a particular fashion is not to say that it cannot work. Indeed it is only because of these laws of mind that reasoning can occur.

The limits of mind implicit in Hume's naturalism are that certain beliefs are instinctual and ineluctable. They are, as Norman Kemp Smith termed them, "natural beliefs."<sup>18</sup> For example, we instinctively believe that the future will be uniform with the past, that the connections between causes and effects are objective, and that the world of external bodies is independent of our perceptions. To prove that these beliefs are

<sup>17</sup> *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1932; rpt. [Hamden:] Archon, 1967), 186. For a helpful comparison of Locke's and Hume's views on the question of the efficacy of reason, see John P. Wright, "Association, Madness, and the Measures of Probability in Locke and Hume," *Psychology and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Christopher Fox (New York: AMS, 1987), 103-27.

<sup>18</sup> *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941).

ineluctable features of human nature, Hume shows not only that we do not have a rational foundation for them, but that we could not find such a foundation. They are and must remain instinctive. Hence skeptical arguments are useful in showing that cognition is determined by causal laws. If the mind were not determined to hold certain indispensable beliefs, reason would lead us to skeptical suspension of belief in them. The fact that nature will not let us suspend belief for very long, if at all, means that nature is the driving force behind this category of belief. Nature wins over philosophy, fortunately for us since otherwise philosophy would paralyze us. As Hume says in the first *Enquiry* about our instinctive inductive expectations,

this operation of the mind... is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable, that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason, which is slow in operations; appears not, in any degree, during the first years of infancy; and at best is, in every age and period of human life, extremely liable to error and mistake. It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which... may be independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding. (v. 2 / 55)

To understand Hume's valuation of instinct as against reason, one simply has to imagine having to calculate the probability that the ground would remain solid every time one wished to take a step.

Once we look beyond the few moments in the *Treatise* in which Hume depicts himself as venting his spleen, we find that the ultimate point behind the skeptical passages is invariably a thesis of cognitive naturalism, not one of neo-Pyrrhonism. Naturally, not ratiocinatively, the mind holds certain indispensable beliefs. This will seem less shocking if we consider the alternatives as they would appear to Hume. If the mind were not natural and did not follow laws like "Thou shalt believe in external objects," it would not, as a purely ratiocinative entity, operate upon any unvalidated premises and must therefore either validate all the premises beneath all premises *in infinitum* or it must find some one bedrock validatable premise from which all other premises and all knowledge can be ratioci-



natively educed. On the face of it this seems less likely than the tenet that cognitions are causal events following natural laws and operating on the basis of a few instinctively held premises.

What is the point behind his skeptical argument that even mathematical certainty degenerates under rational scrutiny into probability, which itself degenerates likewise *in infinitum*? His point, he says, is to show that since such suspension of belief never occurs, we must not be purely rational beings and that "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel." "'Tis happy," he says, "that nature breaks the force of all skeptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding" (*THN*, I. iv. 1 / 183, 187). Just so with the belief in the independent existence of the external world: "Nature has not left this to his [a skeptic's] choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (iv. 2 / 187). Hume registers reservations about this skeptical aspect of naturalism only in places in which he is depicting a momentary fit of spleen, something like what he described in the Letter to a Physician. These fits make lively reading, and doubtless they represent some genuine reservations that Hume held at some times, but they are the slightest fraction of one book of the *Treatise*. Generally speaking, Hume celebrates nature's victory over philosophical doubt.

Usually we can see why there is anything to celebrate by asking what would appear to Hume to be the case if his skeptical arguments were wrong. In the appendix to the *Treatise* he argues, supposedly to his own confusion, that belief consists simply in vivacity of conception.<sup>19</sup> But he does not lament this conclusion. He is intent on proving it correct. From his point of view, conditions would be worse if he were incorrect.

The fact that belief consists of conceptual vivacity is no cause for alarm so long as one way of enhancing vivacity is strong argument. People often do believe things for other than

<sup>19</sup> Richard Watson also adduced the theory of belief as reiterated in the appendix as indicating a *cause Pyrrhonisme* (see n8). Watson is inspired by Richard Popkin, whose views appeared in some important articles usefully collected in his *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego: Austin, 1980).

rationally satisfactory reasons, but if Hume's theory accounts for the regrettable fact, he had no reason to be more upset about it than before he formulated his theory. It had always been plain that conviction arising from due consideration is only one way in which belief is attained. That belief consists of vivacity is to Hume simply the way things are, and lamenting it would be bootless, but in fact he indicates that the fact is not lamentable.

The mind has the command over all its ideas, and can separate, unite, mix, and vary them, as it pleases; so that if belief consisted merely in a new idea, annex'd to the conception, it wou'd be in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd. We may, therefore, conclude, that belief consists merely...in something, that depends not on the will, but must arise from certain determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters. When we are convinc'd of any matter of fact, we do nothing but conceive it, along with a certain feeling, different from what attends the mere *reveries* of the imagination. And when we express our incredulity concerning any fact, we mean, that the arguments for the fact produce not that feeling. (app., 623-4)

The converse must also be true: when we express our assent to a proposition, the arguments do produce a belief-compelling feeling. Hume continues, "Did not the belief consist in a sentiment different from our mere conception, whatever objects were presented by the wildest imagination, wou'd be on an equal footing with the most establish'd truths founded on history and experience" (624). Of the two alternatives, Hume's is the one that accounts for the familiar experience of being forced to face facts. Either belief is itself an idea annexed to the idea in which we believe, or belief is the force with which the believed idea presents itself to the mind. The first is implausible and undesirable because, if belief is an idea, our control over our ideas would allow us to control our beliefs. It happens that we cannot control our beliefs, and that is a good thing. Experience and memory exert a salutary pressure on our psyches, preventing us, normally, from deluding ourselves indefinitely. Although I can manipulate my ideas of horses and men, creating an idea of a centaur, I cannot make myself believe in a centaur's biological existence. Moreover,

we can present arguments forceful enough to make unwilling people believe things despite their control over their ideas. All this is highly desirable. Human capacity for self delusion is strong enough; happily it is not complete. Hume thinks that the involuntary determination of conceptual vivacity prevents cognitive chaos and works against madness, not vice versa.

I said that there were two points to observe regarding the skeptical implications of naturalism, the first being that the concept of natural law, like that of any other law, entails limitation. If reasoning is a natural phenomenon and follows natural laws, it is constrained by those laws; but in another sense, of which Hume was duly appreciative, reasoning is made functional by those laws. The second point to observe is that Hume's tenet of the compatibility of free will with determinism would make the willed functioning of reason at least appear compatible with its resting upon a base of instinctive beliefs. Reason, properly understood, would no more be compromised than free will.

Admittedly, that Hume thought along these lines is difficult to document. Although he set forth in detail why will is compatible with determinism, he did not take the next step and explain in print that, consequently, freely willed acts of reasoning are compatible with their being partly determined by instincts. Whereas there are the notorious passages in the *Treatise* in which he frets over the status of reason vis-a-vis instinct,<sup>20</sup> one has to infer a Humean solution to the problem by relating Hume's naturalistic account of reasoning to his

<sup>20</sup> For which, see *THN*, II, iii 1-3, and *EHU*, viii 1-2. Compatibilism has long since gained respectability. As Donald Davidson said, "Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Moore, Schlick, Ayer, Stevenson, and a host of others have done what can be done, or ought ever to have been needed, to remove the confusions that can make determinism seem to frustrate freedom" ("Freedom to Act," *Essays on Actions and Events* [rpt Oxford: Clarendon, 1982], 63). An entertaining account of the compatibility of unconscious impulse with conscious reasoning is Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), ch. 2. In ch. 1, §1, Dennett makes fun of anxiety over cognitive determinism. A detailed account of determinism with express Humean affinities is Ted Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism: The Mind, Neuroscience, and Life-Hopes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). Ch. 8, §1 is a concise survey of the controversy over compatibilism, starting with Aristotle, proceeding through Hume, and ending with Dennett.

compatibilism. But the implications of these two tenets could hardly have escaped him.<sup>21</sup>

"Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause," says Hume, "of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented" (*THN*, I. iv. 1 / 180). Here reasoning is placed within the web of crisscrossing arrows of causal sequences that comprise the world of natural phenomena. Frequently, though not infallibly, a cause, namely reason, brings into being an effect of a cognitive state that with some propriety may be called knowledge (that is, a state of mind in which available evidence is accounted for to the extent that human limitations allow). Trace the causal arrow back along any such sequence to the cause of this cause of knowledge and, according to Hume, we will find a freely willed choice to undertake the act of reasoning. Moving yet another step back to the cause of the choice to reason, we find that the choice was prompted by a causal complex of character (perhaps a disposition to be reasonable or to be curious), motives (perhaps fear of the consequences of being mistaken about some matter of fact), and circumstances. That a choice is determined by the chooser's character in reaction with other factors does not alter its being a choice, so free will is compatible with causal determinism.

Now if we focus in on one step in this sequence, that of reasoning itself, it too is revealed to be comprised of a sequence of causal steps in a causal complex. This psychic complex, according to Hume, would include raw sensory data processed instinctively according to laws such as "Believe that your perceptions exist continuously and independently of your sentience" and "Believe that the future will resemble the past." Such laws determine what reason is; but reason, such as it is now revealed to be, is still reason, just as free will remains free will despite our realization that what one wills is determined by the sort of person one is. The role of our characters in our choices is analogous to that of our natural beliefs in our reasoning. Just as given the sort of person one is, one will choose this rather than that, given the instinctually based nature of reason, reason will function certain ways and not

<sup>21</sup> They did not escape Tom Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg. See their *Hume and the Problem of Causation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56-7.

others. That choice and reason are causally conditioned has been disturbing to some philosophers, but by no means to all. Whether or not Hume should have been disturbed by this tenet, it would have been very possible for him, like many others since, to accept, with occasional reservations, the instinctual basis of reason.

Once again, reason determined by certain salutary instincts can still be *effective*. That is, it can be a cause that brings into being the effect of knowledge. Even conceding, as certainly Hume would, that this instinctually determined reason is not as reliably effective as is desirable, he would still have to consider the rationalist alternative in which nature does not prevail over philosophy. If the natural process did not take place and reason had instead to validate all of its steps and all of its premises *in infinitum*, reasoning could never result in conviction. Instead it would result in the effects of suspension of belief, anomie, and, eventually, death (see *EHU*, xii. 2 / 160). Hume has less reason to be appalled by the implications of naturalism for reason than he would have by those of the rationalist alternative, which, were it veridical, would be disastrous for reason.

The question of how disturbed Hume was by his own skepticism is a genuine one. Its answer is not obvious, and questions of degree are highly unmanageable. The present goal has not been to expose error, but only to moderate a tendency. Those who see Hume as traumatized react to real evidence that is conspicuous and hard to ignore. But they do ignore the preponderance of the evidence, which unobtrusively indicates that Hume was not terribly troubled. Proportionately very little in his works indicates philosophical distress. Proportionately very little biographical evidence indicates that he was uncomfortable with his philosophy. From a Humean perspective, the puissance of skepticism can be seen as confirming rather than subverting empiricism and naturalism. And if we take Hume seriously when he explained his view of Pyrrhonian deadlock, it would in fact have been impossible for him to be disturbed without his state of mind's being in plain contradiction of his own tenets.

Explaining that a suspension of belief is little to be dreaded, he wrote reassuringly that

[A] Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind...[S]o fatal an

event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. (*EHU*, xii. 2 / 160)

The point is that Pyrrhonian consternation cannot last for any considerable length of time. Skeptical arguments can result in only "momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion" (xii. 1 / 155 n.). The reason, Hume explains in several places, is that the mind is so framed that naturally it cannot sustain a firm grasp of extended subtle reasonings, such as a train of skeptical doubts leading putatively to suspension of belief: "[T]he conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy."<sup>27</sup> And what we cannot grasp firmly and believe strongly cannot affect us viscerally:

A consideration...which we enter into with difficulty, which we cannot retain without care and attention, will never produce those genuine and durable movements of passion, which are the result of nature, and the constitution of the mind...The air is too fine to breathe in, where it is above the winds and clouds of the atmosphere.<sup>28</sup>

Putting together Hume's theory of belief, then, we get a natural balance, which our own personal experience will confirm, in which ratiocination enhances vivacity and belief until it becomes wiredrawn, the point at which the danger of going awry increases. As the extremity of reason, Pyrrhonism

<sup>27</sup> *THN*, I. iv. 1 / 186; see. iii. 13 / 144.

<sup>28</sup> "The Sceptic," *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 172. I must thank Joe Dupras for helpfully commenting upon a draft of this article.

is as wiredrawn as anything can be. Presumably Hume judged from his own experience, like a good empiricist, when he found that Pyrrhonian disturbances are necessarily ephemeral. Is it plausible to suppose that Hume was profoundly disturbed by his skepticism and then, in the face of this personal experience, formulated a theory about how skepticism could not disturb us appreciably? It seems more likely that he formulated this theory upon the basis of his experience that, happily, nature will not let philosophy lead us catastrophically wrong.