# Experimental Philosophy, Blind Submission, and Hume’s Other Sceptical Principles

Miren Boehm

The project of Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* as he describes it in its “Introduction” is motivated on the one hand, by the disgraceful condition of the philosophical world—which Hume attributes to the shameless conduct and shady methods of its practitioners—and on the other hand, and in vivid contrast, the dazzling accomplishments of natural experimental philosophy. With the greatest enthusiasm the young Hume designs a master plan: he will apply the experimental method of reasoning to the human domain and thereby establish philosophy on a solid and secure foundation. He announces this “foundational project”[[1]](#footnote-1) in the following: “In pretending… to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new…” (T Intro. 6).[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is hard to reconcile the zealous and optimistic Hume of the Introduction with the doubting and even despairing Hume at the end of Book 1. There are no shortage of interpretative difficulties surrounding the project of the *Treatise*, but the minefield hidden under the banal “Conclusion of this book” is in a category of its own. Ascertaining the source of the doubts that deliver Hume to a dramatic epistemological crisis continues to be a fundamental interpretative challenge. An even more onerous task is to understand Hume’s way of going on: when Hume emerges from the crisis he endorses “sceptical principles,” adopts an attitude of “carelessness” and, describing himself a “true sceptic” he resumes his philosophical project.

In this essay, I put forward an interpretation of Hume’s “Conclusion” that hopefully renders Book 1 a more intelligible and harmonious work. While Hume’s Conclusion is a narration with a narrator who faces difficulties and undergoes various changes, I will not distinguish between the narrator and Hume. I begin with a discussion of Hume’s doubts and worries and propose both some plausible causes and reasons for diminishing their importance. Second, I distinguish the motivating forces of curiosity and ambition from Hume’s commitment to philosophical principles. The sparks of the passions propel Hume to resume his project but his commitment to philosophical principles precedes them. I argue that Hume reveals this commitment first when after the crisis he characterizes his “blind submission” to the senses and understanding as the most perfect display of his “sceptical disposition and principles” (T 1.4.7.10). Hume’s sceptical principles include a set of attitudes, principles, and guidelines for being a *true* *sceptic.* The so-called “Title

Principle” is one such principle, and I examine its background and force and put forward a reading.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sceptical Principles serve to repair and reinforce Hume’s “leaky weather-beaten vessel” for the journey ahead (T 1.4.7.1).

# Doubts

Hume’s doubts and worries in “Conclusion of this book” (T 1.4.7) are surprising and baffling. The previous section, “Of Personal Identity,” ends with “’Tis now time…to proceed in the accurate anatomy of human nature, having fully explain’d the nature of our judgment and understanding” (T 1.4.6.23). Instead, Hume pauses to ponder his “voyage” and sinks into a deep state of despair (T 1.4.7.1). He laments the “weakness, and disorder” of his faculties (T 1.4.7.1). He worries he might not be “following truth,” or worse yet, that he has no criterion of truth. He can “give no reason” why he should assent to his “most accurate and exact reasonings.” He finds that the vivacity essential to belief “seeming is so trivial, and so little founded on reason” (T 1.4.7.3). He recalls a

contradiction between the conclusions of reason and the senses. He is disappointed with his account of the idea of necessity (T 1.4.7.4-5). And he finds himself stuck in a “dangerous dilemma” or an impossible choice between “false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.6).

Some of these doubts rear their heads briefly at various points in Book 1, but most are new:

when Hume first defends his findings, he does not raise those issues. And why would he? These findings are the product of the “experimental philosophy” (T Intro. 7) he proudly aligns himself with in the “Introduction” to the *Treatise*. In fact, in the Introduction Hume alerts us to the kinds of worries and despair he expresses in the Conclusion and urges that when “we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented” perceiving that “we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside our experience of their reality” (T Intro. 9). He also stresses the universality of the limitations of his science:

But if this impossibility of explaining ultimate principles should be esteemed a defect in the science of man, I will venture to affirm, that 'tis a defect common to it with all the sciences, and all the arts….None of them can go beyond experience, or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority. (T Intro. 10)

Hume goes on then to promise that unlike those who impose “their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles,” (T Intro. 9) his science will remain within its proper bounds. Finally, he reassures his readers: “despair has almost the same effect upon us with enjoyment, and that we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes” (T Intro. 9).

Hume’s despair is indeed short-lived, but why does it emerge at all? Nothing prior to the Conclusion seems powerful enough to account for the magnitude of the effect. I thus propose some plausible, circumstantial causes. There might be a clue in Hume’s reference to the “storm, which beats upon me from every side” and:

I have expos'd myself to the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians; and can I wonder at the insults I must suffer? I have declar'd my disapprobation of their systems; and can I be surpriz'd, if they shou'd express a hatred of mine and of my person? (T 1.4.7.2).

Hume’s enemies and haters are not the “late philosophers in *England,* who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing” (Intro.7); nor are they the natural experimental philosophers he is excited to follow and emulate. The list above suggests that Hume’s enemies fall in the rationalist camp. And it seems that some rough encounters with a gang of rationalists have shaken Hume’s confidence and determination. Perhaps the rough encounters are merely feared and anticipated, but even so, they have a profound effect on him: “Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning” (T 1.4.7.2).

There are interesting similarities in this respect between Hume and Newton. Hume praises Newton in *The* *History of England* for being “cautious in admitting no principles but such as were founded on experiment; but resolute to adopt every such principle, however new or unusual” (H. Part II, James II, Ch. 71). Hume admires the attitudes and method of Newton. Newton’s “new or unusual” principles were also met, as Hume would remark, with the “severest scrutiny… in all parts of Europe” (1997, 1). At the center of this scrutiny and skepticism was the idea that gravity was an essential property of bodies. While Newton’s gravity “marvelously” explained, as Emilie Du Châtelet (1742: ch. 16, §388) put it, a great variety of natural phenomena, the notion that gravity was essential to bodies was considered by almost everyone absurd, including Newton on occasions.[[4]](#footnote-4) In one of his replies to Richard Bentley, considered “one of the most famous of all [Newton’s] pronouncements concerning the possibility of action at a distance” (Janiak, 2021) Newton remarks:

That gravity should be innate, inherent, and essential to matter, so that one body may act upon another at a distance through a vacuum, without the mediation of anything else, by and through which their action and force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an absurdity that I believe no man who has in philosophical matters a competent faculty of thinking can ever fall into it. (Newton 2004: 102–3)

Newton’s ‘gravity’ was absurdbecause it controverted the principles of mechanical intelligibility (Janiak, 2021). Some of Hume’s findings are likewise considered absurd because they are not rationally intelligible.

Relatedly, Hume’s findings, like Newton’s, are “marvelous” in the sense discussed in “Of

Miracles” in the first *Enquiry.* Hume remarks that with “marvelous” testimony,

The very same principle of experience, which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of witnesses, gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact, which they endeavour to establish; from which contradiction there necessarily arises a counterpoize, and mutual destruction of belief and authority. (E

10.8)

Elsewhere he observes that the marvelous is “a circumstance which, on all occasions, gives much ground for doubt and suspicion” (H 61.95). We might say that marvelous findings challenge our “system of realities” (T 1.3.9.5).

Finally, while Hume *arrives* at his conclusions through reasoning and argumentation during his investigations in Book 1, in the Conclusion, he assessesthem independently of their supporting arguments, which creates the opportunity for doubt. Descartes speaks to this phenomenon when he distinguishes “truths which are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends” and our posterior consideration of those truths. He remarks that we might “later remember simply the conclusions […] The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and immutable conviction concerning these conclusions” (Second Replies, AT 7:146, CSM 2:104). Hume, of course, didn’t need to be aware of this phenomenon to be affected by it.

Perhaps some or all these factors contribute to the emotional, epistemological crisis Hume vividly describes in a climatic passage in the Conclusion (T 1.4.7.8).[[5]](#footnote-5) Had Hume revisited his worries

and doubts when his mind was “all collected within itself” (T 1.4.7.13) he could have, I think, pushed back quite convincingly. First, he worries that “after the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou’d assent to it” (T 1.4.7.3). But isn’t the fact one has reasoned in *the most accurate and exact manner* compelling reason to assent to it? Suppose we pressure the mathematicians and merchants Hume mentions in *Treatise* 1.4.1. to provide reasons for their assent to the conclusions of their “most accurate and exact reasonings.” Wouldn’t the right response be to invite the challenger to reason or calculate for themselves and “see” why they believe their conclusions or results? The companion worry that we might not be following truth could be addressed in a similar manner. For Hume, the concept of truth does not stand at the end of some process we have yet to discover; rather, it arises from the ordinary process of reasoning corrected and perfected over time.

Second, consider Hume’s dissatisfaction with his account of necessity. The exact same dissatisfactions emerge with alternatives. As Hume reports, the “*Cartesians”* have concluded that matter “is endow’d with no efficacy” (T 1.3.14.8) and Occasionalists “have had recourse to a supreme spirit or deity” (T 1.3.14.10). These accounts also turn “into ridicule all our past pains and industry”; it is also true on these views that “when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without meaning” (T 1.4.7.5).[[6]](#footnote-6) I discuss Hume’s “dangerous dilemma” (T 1.4.7.6) in the third section.

# Blind Submission and Sceptical Principles

The “*intense* view” of the “imperfections of human reason” provokes a crisis of belief: “I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (T 1.4.7.8). Of course, this “rejection” is impossible for human beings. Even in the “most deplorable condition imaginable” (T 1.4.7.8) we feel hunger and the desire to mingle with others, and these we can’t reject. “Nature” forces us into awareness of desires and beliefs and rewards us with the pleasure of desire satisfied and the indolence of easy belief.

What happens next in the text is significant but complicated, which is why I break it down into four segments, each with a label in parenthesis. Hume writes (“Determined”): “I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life” (T 1.4.7.10). Then the memory of his prior deplorable condition brought about by the intense reflections puts Hume in a splenetic mood. Thus (“Splenetic”): “I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy.” And he continues “These are my sentiments in that splenetic humour, which governs me at present” (T 1.4.7.10). Following his splenetic outburst he declares (“Blind Submission”): “I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles” (T 1.4.7.10). And having submitted blindly to his faculties, Hume writes (“Obligation”):

But does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself… that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? (T 1.4.7.10)

“Determined” and “Blind Submission” have a similar theme: We must believe and rely on our faculties. “Splenetic” and “Obligation” also share a theme: no painful philosophy. But the levels of description between “Determined” and “Splenetic” on the one hand and “Blind Submission” and “Obligation” on the other are significantly different. In the first two, Hume describes himself as subject to natural forces. He is determined to believe and act as a leaf floating on a river is determined to spin and move downstream. He finds himself likewise “governed” by his “splenetic humour.” However, the language then shifts to the normative. “I may” comes before “I must” “yield to the current of nature.” Yielding to the current of nature is not the same as being determined by the current of nature. While one “may” yield to nature, one “may” not be determined. Hume also describes himself as “submitting blindly”to his faculties, by which he means submitting *without justification*. And of course, the language of obligation is also normative.

While nature determines all of us to reason and believe, I argue that only philosophers submit blindly to their faculties. Animals neither yield to nature nor are blindly submitted to nature. The category of justification is normative and brute nature is non-normative. To describe a snail as submitting to its faculties without justification is to blur important different categories. But the vulgar do not yield to nature or submit blindly to their faculties either. To yield or to submit to something (as in surrender) implies some resistance. But the vulgar have not even considered the question of justification and Hume tells us that much when he portrays the vulgar as subject to some “illusion” of the imagination that keeps them merrily ignorant (T 1.4.7.6). And given that Hume later identifies “sceptical principles” as essential to philosophy (T 1.4.7.11), the characterization of his blind submission as the most perfect display of his “sceptical disposition and principles” strongly suggests that his blind submission is an expression of philosophical principles Hume is committed to. The vulgar *determination* to reason and believe is not an expression of any philosophical principles.

When we read “Blind Submission” and “Obligation” together the logic of the text also strongly suggests that blind submission is an expression of or follows from Hume’s commitment to philosophical principles. Consider the beginning of “Obligation”. It starts with “But does it follow.” But follow from what? In “Blind Submission” Hume remarks “I must yield to the current of nature” but then, confusingly, in “Obligation” he asks whether it follows that “I must strive against the current of nature.” And why *would* it follow from his blind submission to the senses and understanding that he is obligated to philosophize at all and much less to do so when it appears painful and fruitless? The answer lies in the interpretation of Hume’s “blind submission” as an expression of his philosophical principles. The “but does it follow” then asks whether doing painful and fruitless philosophy *also follows* from his commitments to philosophical principles.

But suppose Hume is not committed to any philosophical principles until he feels curious and ambitious (T 1.4.7.12), then we must allow him three responses in recognition of his inability to justify his faculties: A) to give up philosophy; B) to engage in the same shameless speculation as occasionalists when confronted with inexplicable and uncomfortable facts; C) to refuse to engage in speculation and submit blindly. We don’t believe B) is a lively option for Hume. But if Hume’s mind is a philosophical tabula rasa when nature rescues him, it is not clear why he considers A) and C) but never B). I suggest Hume never surrenders his philosophical principles. And this is why there is a tincture of pride in Hume’s portrayal of his blind submission as *the most perfect* display of his “sceptical principles.”

Don Ainslie argues that the “but does it follow” passage makes the case that “there is no obligation to philosophize” (2015: 224-5 and 239). But Ainslie does not explain from what in *context* it would follow that Hume was obligated to philosophize. And while I agree with Ainslie that for Hume philosophizing is optional, I don’t see evidence that prior to the Conclusion, Hume believes there is such an obligation. As I read it, Hume is asking whether it follows *from his philosophical principles* that he must continue doing philosophy when it seems painful and fruitless.

To be clear, Hume’s commitment to philosophical principles does not of course *motivate* him to resume “the accurate anatomy of human nature” (T 1.4.6.23). Hume resumes his project when it appears pleasurable again or when he feels the sparks of curiosity and ambition (T 1.4.7.12). But passions do not determine the path for their own satisfaction. Reason alone does not propel action, but passions alone do not determine principles of action. When curiosity and ambition strike again,

Hume does not pause to weigh whether to satisfy his passions with rationalist philosophy or superstition.[[7]](#footnote-7) This strongly suggests that the commitment to philosophical principles is in place before he is motivated to return to his project.

Hume’s blind submission shows most perfectly his sceptical principles, but, and this is crucial, submitting blindly to his faculties is also what the “true philosopher” would choose to do.

Early in Book 1, Hume describes this figure as follows:

Nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes, and having establish'd any doctrine upon a sufficient number of experiments, rest contented with that, when he sees a farther examination would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. (T 1.1.4.1)

Hume’s blind submission is an expression of both “sceptical principles” and, as we might call them, “experimental principles.” And this is because, I argue, Sceptical principles are essentially principles of experimental philosophy, the most fundamental of which are: our ultimate authority must be experience, and—its corollary—we must refuse to engage in speculation and hypotheses. I begin to make this case by examining the meaning of “sceptical” and variants in contexts in which Hume employs those terms with approbation. Hume’s *Abstract* is an excellent example:

the philosophy contain’d in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all. When we believe any thing of *external* existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. (A. 27)

In calling his philosophy “very sceptical” Hume is not casting doubt on his own findings; on the contrary, he affirms them. While the “and” in the phrase “very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections” might suggest imperfections and limits lie outside the scope of “very sceptical,” it is clear that the reduction of (almost) all reasoning to experience and Hume’s account of belief as lively conception are well within its scope. This is confirmed by Hume’s reference to “other sceptical topics.” These are sceptical topics and there are others. But these “sceptical topics” are part of the experimental project Hume is engaged in. The account of belief as a lively idea is a positive result of Hume’s application of “experimental principles.” So are the discoveries of the “limitations” and “imperfections” of our capacities *relative* to our previous inflated beliefs about them. But even if “imperfections” and “limitations” don’t fall within the scope of “very sceptical,” those terms are most often orbiting around “sceptical” and variants in Hume’s work, and the next text is an instance.

Hume remarks that if “*the* *Newtonian* philosophy be rightly understood” then claims about the vacuum must be grounded on experience and observation. “Nothing is more suitable to that philosophy, than a modest scepticism to a certain degree, and a fair confession of ignorance in subjects, that exceed human capacity” (T 1.2.5.26n12). Hume is calling attention to the failure of the Newtonian philosophy, as he understands it, to follow “experimental principles” as strictly as it should. To do so, Hume presses, it must restrict its theories to experience and issue a “fair confession” of its ignorance and limitations. But the “modest scepticism” suitable to Newtonian philosophy is exactly what is suitable to Hume’s experimental philosophy or “true philosophy.”

Finally, consider Hume’s “sceptical solution” to the problem of induction in the

first *Enquiry* (E. 5). Hume’s solution is “sceptical” in the sense that it is “a fair confession” of his limits. Hume acknowledges his inability to satisfy the demand for intelligibility or insight. He nonetheless offers a *solution* which, from the standpoint of experimental philosophy, is a resounding achievement. Hume’s account of causal reasoning unifies reasoning across nature; it applies to all human beings—including children and the cognitively impaired—and animals. It powerfully predicts their behavior.

Hume’s blind submission is also a “fair confession” of his inability to justify his faculties. This is why in blindly submitting he “shows most perfectly [his]sceptical disposition and principles” (T 1.4.7.10). After Hume’s “fair confession,” he considers the question of whether it follows from his commitments that he must pursue philosophy when it brings pain and despair. And his immediate response to this question is this: “No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable (T 1.4.7.10).

Hume is *not* saying—and on “experimental principles” he ought not say—that to reason or believe anything is certainly foolish. The “certainly” qualifies not “fool” but “reason and believe any thing”; Hume is asserting that to believe anything *with certainty* is foolish.[[8]](#footnote-8) I can offer three considerations in support of the “with certainty” reading: First, the sentence that immediately follows it: “Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance…” Why would Hume assert that we are certainly fools for reasoning and believing *anything* and then appeal to “good” reasons to guide him in the future? Second, Hume’s *Letter from a Gentleman to his*

*Friend in Edinburgh* where Hume quotes a list of charges against him. Under the first one, “Universal Scepticism,” he describes being accused of doubting everything and of maintaining “the Folly of pretending to believe any Thing with Certainty” (L 14, Nor 425). It is clear from Hume’s response that he agrees with the second part—he does believe it is foolish to believe anything *with certainty*— but disagrees with the charge that he recommends universal doubt. Finally, the “with certainty” reading harmonizes with Hume’s characterization of the ”true sceptic” (T 1.4.7.14) at the end of the

Conclusion.

The sceptical principles displayed by Hume’s blind submission are the principles Hume finds essential for doing philosophy: “If we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after such manner” (T 1.4.7.11). What follows this passage immediately is the Title Principle. Having resolved that his philosophical principles are consistent with doing philosophy only when he likes it, Hume inserts an inclination or a propensity to engage in philosophy in both sets of principles. And immediately after he articulates the principles, he reports feeling such inclination—curiosity and ambition—and resumes his philosophical project.

The term “sceptical principles” seems to include a cluster of attitudes that contrast sharply with the uncurved pretensions, speculation, and general inability to deal with frustrated curiosity that Hume describes in the “Introduction.” Sceptical principles include a willingness to limit oneself to experience, epistemic modesty, a “fair confession” of limitations and ignorance, and one we have not discussed yet: “carelessness and in-attention” (T 1.4.2.57). Unlike the other attitudes included under “sceptical principles, “carelessness” does not seem to be an admirable one. Hume recommends this attitude at the end of “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” where he laments that they “are the coherence and constancy of our perceptions, which produce the opinion of their continu’d existence; tho’ these qualities of perceptions have no perceivable connexion with such an existence” (T 1.4.2.56). Hume’s “no perceivable connexion” refers to a lack of intelligibility. Because of this, he confronts a painful question: “how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose” (T 1.4.2.56) in the senses and the imagination. And then he pronounces it “impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses” warning us that we only “expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner” (T 1.4.2.57). How ought the ‘true philosopher’ respond to these difficulties?

“Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy” (T 1.4.2.57). Hsueh Qu remarks that “in evading the cold grasp of excessive scepticism, Hume can do no better than to appeal to ‘carelessness and in-attention.’” (2020: 121). Hume “can do no better” because the only alternative for him is to abandon philosophy. Instead, he chooses to ignore the difficulties, and this seems like an easy copout. In what follows however, I defend the position that Hume’s attitude of carelessness is a principled one; it accords with the principles of experimental philosophy. I also defend the view that Hume has excellent reasons for not succumbing to the alternative or abandoning philosophy.

First, while Hume regards the justificatory questions to be unanswerable in *Treatise* 1.4.2, this is not his considered opinion. Toward the end of the Conclusion, he underscores the fact that science is still in its infancy: “Two thousand years with such long interruptions… are a small space of time to give any tolerable perfection to the sciences…” (T 1.4.7.14) Thus a “true sceptic,” Hume declares, will be “diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as his philosophical conviction” (T 1.4.7.14). The true sceptic neither imposes his “conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles” (T Intro. 9) nor acts “as if every thing was [equally] uncertain” (T Intro. 2). And this is why at the end of the Conclusion Hume retracts all expressions of absolute assurance from his writings excusing his use of “certainty” as extorsions (“those expressions were extorted from me”) from the circumstances (T 1.4.7.15). This strongly suggests that the justification of our faculties is an open question for science, and the proper, mature attitude is not to abandon philosophy or science but to consider questions that escape the tools of current science with a certain distance or carelessness, attitudes Hume also recommends at the end of the Conclusion as we see shortly.

Cognition of the limitations of his science together with the proper attitude of carelessness also explains the meaning of the last instance of “sceptical principles” in the Conclusion. Hume remarks that it is “proper” to “in general indulge our inclination in the most elaborate philosophical researches, notwithstanding our sceptical principles” (T 1.4.7.15). Given that (almost) nothing is absolutely certain someone who finds pleasure in elaborate research should pursue it. But this is not a carte blanche to follow our passions wherever they might lead us. Judgments about matters of fact, and specially within science, will not be determined or even influenced by the passions; for Hume those judgments must always be answerable to experience.

Second, the justificatory questions are outside the bounds of Hume’s current state of science: observation, experience, or experiment cannot address them. Again the question is how to respond to such challenges. For many, frustrated curiosity and impotence leads to speculation. In the “Introduction,” Hume recommends something else: When we see, that we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contended [and] perfectly satisfied in the main of our ignorance…” (T Intro. 9). We should not succumb to despair: “we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying” it that it “vanishes” (T Intro. 9). Someone who “studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so over-whelm’d with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it” (T 1.4.7.14).

It is important to appreciate that Hume’s inability to justify his faculties is *not* a failureor defect of his science. Experience is a self-imposed limitation; Hume’s science is *essentially* limited by experience and thus it cannot be a criticism of his science that it is limited by experience. Dogs are not defective because they can’t fly. Carelessness is not a “can do no better,” for those who have done “better” are often governed by their passions, rely on speculation, and aggrandize their accomplishments. Hume honorably opts for carelessness over speculation. Like Newton, Copernicus, and Galileo before him, and many scientists after him, Hume expresses a radical commitment to his science, however new or unusual or even absurd its findings may

appear.

Finally, Hume would be forced to abandon his project if the argument were made that justifying our faculties was essential for the success of moral experimental philosophy. But there is compelling evidence to the contrary. The astonishing advances in natural experimental philosophy are the fuel of Hume’s project. Hume takes pains in the Introduction to convince his readers that the same level of success (if not more) may reasonably be expected in the moral domain.

# The Title Principle

The Title principle follows immediately after Hume’s endorsement of Sceptical principles. I have proposed that “sceptical principles” signify a cluster of attitudes proper of the true sceptic or experimental philosopher; they serve to guide us away from speculation They serve to correct the unseemly tendencies of the philosophers Hume vividly describes in the Introduction. The Title Principle is also part of Hume’s Sceptical Principles; it is a response to the fact that, as we might put it, we have been taken for a ride by a reason that has no title on us. The purpose of the Title Principle is to establish a rule by which we can distinguish reason that is worthy of our assent and reason that is not.

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11) This rule is meaningful only if there is an illegitimate reason that operates on us. We don’t need a rule to guide us when our natural tendencies are adequate for our purposes. The force behind the Title Principle is a problem with reason. Illegitimate reason is *not* lively, does *not* mix with propensities, and *yet* operates upon us.[[9]](#footnote-9) I suggest this is what Hume calls *false reason.*

Hume’s first reference to “false reason” occurs in the context of his treatment of the “foundations of mathematics” when he identifies a propensity of the imagination at the core of false reason and describes it metaphorically:

The imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by its oars, carries on its course without any new impulse. (T 1.4.2.22)

The Galley Principle, as we might call it, is an inertial tendency of the imagination when it is “set into any train of thinking.” This is the source of the doctrine of infinite divisibility: We start by dividing space and time as far as we can go, and then the imagination extends the rule of division beyond our capacities. Thus Hume remarks that “sound reason convinces us that there are bodies *vastly* more minute than those, which appear to our senses” but “false reason wou’d perswade us, that there are bodies *infinitely* more minute” (T 1.2.4.24). We reason soundly when we infer that the bodies that appear indivisible to the naked eye admit of further division.[[10]](#footnote-10) False reason is the illegitimate continuation of sound reason; it is in the sense that it is reason at all. It hijacks a “train of thinking” that is sound at its origin and proceeds “even when its object fails it” or “without any new impulse.”

Hume’s discussion of the fictitious, perfect standard of equality also singles out the Galley Principle at its core. Hume explains that the mind becomes “accustom’d” to our “judgements and their corrections” and “supposes some imaginary standard of equality, by which the appearances and measuring are exactly corrected” (T 1.2.4.24). We start with sound reasoning (judgments and corrections) and once a pattern or rule is discernable the Galley Principle extends it to its seemingly logical but illegitimate end. Likewise, Hume observes:

A musician finding his ear become every day more delicate, and correcting himself by reflection and attention, proceeds with the same act of the mind, even when the subject fails him, and entertains a notion of a compleat *tierce* or *octave*, without being able to tell whence he derives his standard. A painter forms the same fiction with regard to colours. A mechanic with regard to motion. To the one *light* and *shade*; to the other *swift* and *slow* are imagin'd to be capable of an exact comparison and equality beyond the judgments of the senses. (T 1.2.4.24)

The musician engages in sound reasoning by correcting himself with the help of reflection and attention but then “proceeds with the same act of the mind, even when the subject fails him.” False reason is parasitic on chains of sound reasoning that display a pattern; it characteristically extends the pattern “without the impulse” of experience. I suggest but cannot defend here, that it is some feeling of uneasiness and vulnerability that occurs when a pattern of reasoning comes to a halt at a “seemingly trivial” point that engages the imagination to perpetuate the pattern to a perfect or self- evident and pleasing end.

Consider now Hume’s argument at the beginning “Of scepticism with regard to reason” (T 1.4.1) and the “dangerous dilemma” (T 1.4.7.6). *Treatise* 1.4.1 starts with “rules” that are “certain and infallible.” However, because we apply them with “our fallible and uncertain faculties,” we “must therefore in every reasoning form a new judgement, as a check or control” (T 1.4.1.1). Hume describes a process in which we start checking and controlling and then the Galley Principle takes over and destroys reason. He of course deploys this argument as a *reductio*: given that we *do* have beliefs, the cogitative model of belief is wrong, and Hume’s sensitive/lively model is vindicated. In Hume’s model, *human nature* brings an end to the process of correction and control: “after the first and second decision” the action of the mind “becomes forc’d and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure” (T 1.4.1.10).

This fact of human nature becomes a target in Hume’s “dangerous dilemma.” We “save ourselves from this total scepticism” (the destruction of all belief) by the “seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them” with a sensible impression (T 1.4.7.7). It is significant that Hume qualifies the triviality in question with “seemingly.” Because if there is nothing trivial about our inability to carry a division infinitely (and I am assuming universal agreement here) then it is not trivial that there is a pause along the way. It is part of our nature to be limited and to get tired. These features are only trivial against some imaginary standard, which is of course the product of false reason.

Importantly, the point at which we naturally stop the chain of reasoning is the point at which we *ought to* stop in accordance with the principles of “true philosophy.” We ought to stop checking and rechecking when ideas become “faint and obscure,” or when there is no “sensible impression.” True philosophers or scientists oughtnot continue a process when they see that doing so leads to speculation beyond the bounds of experience. The thought that “were it not for the trivial property of the fancy” we would not believe anything is an expression of false reason. And thus, I submit, there is no dilemma between “no reason” and “false reason.” It is all false reason. We know it is false reason because its conclusions cannot be determined by experience. We simply cannot reason long enough to test whether reason would indeed destroy itself.

It might be objected, however, that while we cannot exercise our reason long enough to determine this, we may do so by merely thinking about it. Of course, we can’t spread out in our mind all the steps required to think this, but we can do so perhaps with the help of a rule. But that is the fiction. The fiction is that we can think about *matters of fact* by adding “and so on.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Hume rejects this shortcut as unsuitable for science. In this regard, Hume is a rule-following skeptic. We simply don’t know what would happen *in reality* if we were to extend a rule farther than we are able to. The following passages involving the mathematical definition of a right line strongly support this reading.

Referring to mathematicians, Hume demands “How can he prove to me, for instance, that two right lines cannot have one common segment? Or that ‘tis impossible to draw more than one right line betwixt any two points?” he continues: “Shou’d he tell me, that these opinions are obviously absurd, and repugnant to our clear ideas; I wou’d answer, that I do not deny, where two right lines incline upon each other with a sensible angle, but ‘tis absurd to imagine them to have a common segment.” But then he turns to matters of fact to challenge the definition:

But supposing these two lines to approach at the rate of an inch in twenty leagues, I perceive no absurdity in asserting, that upon their contact they become one. For, I beseech you, by what rule or standard do you judge, when you assert, that the line, in which I have suppos’d them to concur, cannot make the same right line with those two, that form so small an angle betwixt them? You must surely have some idea of a right line, to which this line does not agree…. The original standard of a right line is in reality nothing but a certain general appearance; and 'tis evident right lines may be made to concur with each other, and yet correspond to this standard, tho' corrected by all the means either practicable or imaginable. (T 1.2.4.30)

The mathematical definition of a right line fails to apply to reality. We can’t use the definition to predict anything about the lines that appear to our senses. Similarly, we cannot use Newton’s law of inertia to predict the real motion of bodies.[[12]](#footnote-12) In reality, not a single body moves in a straight line, and we simply don’t know what would happen in a universe in which there was only one body in

motion. It is not even clear we can imagine this universe. This is why Hume insists that our “first principles” must be “founded on the imagination and senses” and our conclusions “can never go beyond, much less contradict these faculties” (T 1.2.4.31). For Hume, our standards must be founded on human nature, and this is why he declares: “Human Nature is the only science of man” (T 1.4.7.14).

The Title Principle guides our assent preventing false reason from taking hold of sound reason. It essentially tells us that we ought to assent to reason about matters of fact only when reason receives its impulse from experience, or only when it has an object, or only when it is accompanied by a sensible impression. This is *lively* reason, the core feature of the Title Principle. However, while this criterion is necessary, it is not sufficient: reason must also “mix” with “some propensity.” I think the propensity included in the Title Principle corresponds to the *inclination* Hume identifies as required to do philosophy on Sceptical Principles. But in the context of the Title Principle, it plays a distinctive, fundamental role; the propensity must “mix” with lively reason, and this suggests that it plays a role in the *operation* of reason. This role, I suggest, is to enable *chains* of reasoning necessary to do philosophy; that is, to animate and perpetuate reason. Everyday causal reasoning usually does not go beyond a few steps; it is lively and the product of habit. Hume describes the Galley Principle characteristic of false reason as running on its own, as it were (although I suggested that certain passions might impel it). Hume discovers that experimental reasoning requires not just the impulse from experience but also from the passions. The passions keep philosophical reasoning going and when the right passions (e.g. curiosity or ambition) are not felt, then it doesn’t, and no philosophical principle can command us to continue.

The principles of experimental reason are founded on experience and the office of the passions is to motivate. Superstition in contrast is guided principally by the passions. Both the senses and the passions recruit the services of the imagination, but they do so very differently.

Imagination deployed by the senses has the role of expanding the reach of the senses (and memory), and it does so on principles set by experience. Belief in the unobserved copies experience (constant conjunctions). And the vivacity of causal belief is transferred from the senses.[[13]](#footnote-13) This is why Hume describes experience and habit as “conspiring to operate upon the imagination” making us form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner (T 1.4.7.) When imagination is enlisted by the passions, it has one single goal: to satisfy them. This end justifies any means including disregarding experience and even the rules of logic. The Title Principle endorses the imagination recruited by the senses but does not endorse imagination recruited by the passions *for science.*[[14]](#footnote-14) While some interpreters maintain that the Title Principle allows—or worse: embraces— superstitious reasoning, nothing could be further from the truth.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Title Principle is founded on the most fundamental principle of experimental philosophy: the idea that experience is the ultimate authority. Thus reason in accordance with the Title Principle “contents itself with assigning new causes and principles to the phenomena, which appear in the visible world,” while superstition opens “a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (T 1.4.7.13). Finally, superstition flagrantly violates Hume’s Sceptical Principles by positing ultimate explanations and delighting in speculation. Superstition lacks “modest scepticism” and refuses to recognize experience as the ultimate authority.[[16]](#footnote-16) Hume’s experimental philosophy resolutely rejects superstition.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Bibliography

Ainslie, Donald C. 2015. *Hume’s True Scepticism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baxter, Donald 2018. “A Pyrrhonian Interpretation of Hume on Assent,” in Machuca, D.E. and Reed, B (eds.), *Skepticism:* From Antiquity to the Present*.* New York: Bloomsbury: pp. 380-394.

Boehm, Miren 2013a. “Hume’s Foundational Project in the *Treatise*,” *European Journal of Philosophy*. Advance Online Publication. doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12056.

Boehm, Miren 2013b. “The Normativity of Experience and Causal Belief in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Hume Studies,* 39 (2): 203-231.

Boehm, Miren 2014. “Hume’s Definitions of ‘Cause’: Without Idealizations, Within the Bounds of Science,” *Synthese*, 191, 16: 3803-3019.

Broughton, Janet 2004. “The Inquiry in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Philosophical Review* 113 (4): 537-556.

Cummins, Philip 1999. “Hume’s Diffident Skepticism,” *Hume Studies* 35 (1/2): 43-66.

Descartes, Rene 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, *Volume 2,* ed. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hume, David 1739-1740/2011. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hume, David 1740/1993. *An Abstract of a Book lately Published,* ed. by Steinberg, Eric. Hackett Publishing Company.

Hume, David 1745/1993. *A Letter From a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh,* ed. by Steinberg, Eric. Hackett Publishing Company.

Hume, David 1748/ 2000. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition,* ed. by T. Beauchamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hume, David 1741-1777/1987. *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary,* edited by E. Miller. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.

Hume, David 1754-61/1983. *History of England.*  Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics.

Garrett, Don 1997. *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Garrett, Don 2015. *Hume.* New York: Routledge.

Janiak, Andrew 2004. *Newton: Philosophical Writings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Janiak, Andrew 2021. ‘Newton’s Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

Qu, Hsueh 2020. *Hume’s Epistemological Evolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schafer, Karl 2014. “Curious Virtues in Hume’s Epistemology,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 14 (1): 1-20.

Winkler, Kenneth 1999. “Hume’s Inductive Scepticism,” in Atherton, Margaret (ed.), *The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.* Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, pp. 183-212.

1. See Boehm 2013a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), hereafter cited as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Don Garrett 1997 coins this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Andrew Janiak’s superb entry “Newton’s Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Donald Ainslie (2015: 238) offers a different interpretation of the nature and source of Hume’s doubts. Ainslie argues that Hume occupies the position of the “false philosophers” by taking “for granted our awareness of the mental processes” involved in reasoning. Hume’s doubts stem from “our becoming self conscious about our reasoning and our sensing of the world”. See Ainslie’s *Hume’s True Scepticism* for an excellent discussion of Hume’s Conclusion and Qu’s *Hume’s Epistemological Evolution* for another excellent treatment of Hume’s Conclusion, including a series of sharp arguments against Hume. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I omit the contradiction between the conclusions of the senses and reason because even while highly pessimistic Hume considers it at least “excusable” (T 1.4.7.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. T 1.4.7.13 considers the “option” between philosophy and superstition, but the option is not for Hume but for his readers, or for people attracted to superstition. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Garrett (2015: 228) defends this reading, [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is, strictly speaking, another description of the negation of the Title Principle: It is reason that is lively but does not mix with a propensity. My interpretation of “lively reason mixed with propensity” makes sense of this reading of the negation of the Title Principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I discuss the bounds of sound reason in Boehm, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. T 1.4.1.6 argues in this way: “But this decision, tho’ it shou’d be favourable to our preceeding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still further our first evidence, and must itself be weaken’d by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; till at last there remain nothing of the original probability”. Hume is reasoning in the manner his opponents do. He means to show that if we were to reason in this way, there would be no belief left. T 1.4.1.9 also invokes “and so on, *in infinitum*.” T 1.2.4.14 is another passage with an “and so on *in infinitum”* and it is very clear in this passage that Hume is just thinking like his opponents to reveal a conclusion that they will not be willing to endorse.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hume didn’t fully understand the character of Newton’s natural philosophy. In contrast to Hume, Newton is not a purebred experimental philosopher. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Boehm, 2013b for a discussion about the significance of the transfer of force and vivacity from the present impression to the (imaginative) idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The arts on the other hand would be unrecognizable or even impossible without imagination recruited by the passions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Winkler, 1999: 199-200, Schafer, 2014: p.9, fn.41, and Qu, 2020:152-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hume appeals to *danger* because it is the kind of threat (fear) that weak, superstitious minds respond to (T 1.4.7.13). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I thank Ken Winkler, Don Garrett, Elizabeth Radcliffe, and Hsueh Qu for their comments.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-17)