

Hume's Skeptical Philosophy and the Moderation of Pride

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Abstract

Hume describes skeptical philosophy as having a variety of desirable effects. It can counteract dogmatism, produce just reasoning, and promote social cohesion. When discussing how skepticism may achieve these effects, Hume typically appeals to its effects on pride. I explain how, for Hume, skeptical philosophy acts on pride and how acting on pride produces the desirable effects. Understanding these mechanisms, I argue, sheds light on how, why, when, and for whom skeptical philosophy can be useful. It also illuminates the value of skeptical philosophy for a humanistic education, giving us a reason to include Hume in curricula.

Keywords: Hume, skepticism, pride, humility, comparison, sociability, pedagogy

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1 The value of appreciating our own ignorance

Hume evidently takes a sense of human ignorance to be among the most important results of his own philosophy. In *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published*, for example, he advertises his thinking in his *Treatise of Human Nature* as “very sceptical” and “tend[ing] to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding” (A 28, SBN 657).¹ Again, he begins the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* by promising to “free thinking” from certain perennial metaphysical topics in virtue of their being beyond our comprehension. He is to “shew, from an exact analysis of [human understanding’s] powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects” (EHU 1.12, SBN 12). And he ends this *Enquiry* by endorsing a “mitigated scepticism” produced by glimpsing “the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). Indeed, though Hume takes great measures to inculcate a sense of our cognitive weakness,² he views this sense as a natural or even inevitable result of any careful

¹Citations of *A Treatise of Human Nature* are marked ‘T’ followed by the book, part, section, paragraph, and page number of the Selby-Bigge Nidditch edition; citations of *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published* are marked ‘A,’ followed by the paragraph and page numbers of the same edition; the text for both is derived from the Norton & Norton Clarendon Press edition—as is the text, paragraph, and page numbers of “A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh,” citations of which are marked ‘L.’ Citations of Hume’s *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* use the standard essay title abbreviations of davidhume.org, and the paragraph and page numbers of the Miller edition. Citations of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* are marked ‘EHU’ and ‘EPM,’ followed by section and paragraph numbers, and the page number of the Selby-Bigge Nidditch edition; the texts are derived from the Beauchamp Clarendon Press editions. Citations of *Dissertation of the Passions* and *The Natural History of Religion* use ‘DP’ and ‘NHR,’ followed by the section, paragraph, and page number of the Beauchamp edition. Citations of the *History of England* use ‘H,’ followed by the chapter and paragraph number; the text is derived from the Liberty Fund Edition. Citations of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* use ‘DNR,’ followed by the section and paragraph number, and the page number of Kemp Smith’s edition.

²It is natural to read the lengthy and arduously constructed arguments in *Treatise* Book I, Part 4—“*Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy*”—as, among other things, meant to instill in its readers some measure of the skeptical exasperation that Hume expresses in T 1.4.7. Likewise, Hume’s synopsis of a great variety of skeptical arguments in EHU 12 seems meant to make its readers “sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161).

and rigorous inquiry. Since we encounter insuperable difficulties when we search for the “ultimate causes” of whatever phenomena we choose to study, “the observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us, at every turn, in spite of our endeavours to elude or avoid it” (EHU 4.12, SBN 31).

Without exploring the use and value of this sense of our own ignorance, then, we probably cannot understand what Hume thought philosophy could be and do. Luckily, Hume offers us guidance here. He acknowledges several distinct uses or values.

First, a sense of our own ignorance can be valuable theoretically. As Hume emphasizes, we ourselves can be the subject of inquiry. An accurate portrayal of our mental capacities, however negative, would be one of the important results of a “science of man” (T Intro.4, SBN xv). This result may interest us in its own right. It may also lay the foundation for further theoretical discoveries. According to the optimistic Hume of the *Treatise*, a science of human nature beginning with a survey of our mental capacities is the key to “a compleat system of the sciences” (T Intro.6, SBN xvi). For the more matured Hume of the first *Enquiry*, that survey can at least put to rest any speculative topics which we discover must always lie beyond our ken.

These further theoretical results may then have significant practical upshots: An understanding of human ignorance may have application to politics. Or, by closing off certain abstruse reflections, it may fortify an “unguarded avenue of the mind” through which “superstition” could otherwise “break in [and] overwhelm [us] with religious fears and prejudices” (EHU 1.11, SBN 11).

But while these results are all important, Hume emphasizes skepticism’s use in producing “just reasoning.” Skeptical philosophy, he tells us, benefits those who “become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding,” because “such a reflection. . . naturally inspire[s] them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish[es] their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists” (EHU 12.24, SBN

161–62). In this regard, skeptical philosophy is an antidote to dogmatism, to which it is “contrary in . . . operation and tendency” (T 1.4.1.12, SBN 187; cf. H 62.100). A sense of our own cognitive weakness makes us more careful, and so less dogmatic, in the ideas we embrace. Such “modesty and reserve” not only makes us better reasoners. They also make us better interlocutors. Both correctives are significant, insofar as “the greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161).

Hume’s theories of belief and causal reasoning both provide resources for understanding how and why skeptical philosophy has this salutary effect. Looking first to belief: Skeptical philosophy may lead us to believe that our individual beliefs lack probable truth or are probably false. These second-order beliefs reduce the liveliness of our first-order beliefs.³ Since belief for Hume consists in lively ideas, a reduction in liveliness can remove dogmatically held beliefs. Moreover, it can do so without removing beliefs whose liveliness can be augmented by reflection, say, on a large stock of experience or second-order beliefs about their probable truth. Second, skeptical philosophy may provide us with experiences in which our own reasoning leads us astray. Increasing our pool of such experiences, then, naturally decreases our confidence in our own conclusions. It does this because recognizing our own reasoning to be a possible source of error obliges us to “in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief” (T 1.4.1.1, SBN 180). These “checks” produce doubt, diminishing the liveliness of the conclusions of our reasoning. Plausibly, they could contribute to the “degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner” (EHU 12.24, SBN 162).⁴

³On the mechanics involved, see the discussion of “semantic descent” in Garrett (2015), 162, 236. Similar accounts are developed in Garrett (2016) and Baxter (2018).

⁴In T 1.4.1, Hume argues that repeating such checks “*in infinitum*” leads to “a total extinction

Curiously, neither of these two stories feature prominently in Hume’s discussions of the benefits of skeptical philosophy. This is not because Hume is silent about the mechanisms involved. Rather, he speaks of a different, more circuitous route. Skeptical philosophy brings about its desirable effects on our doxastic dispositions by acting first on the passions. “Every passion,” he says, “is mortified by it” (EHU 5.1, SBN 40–41).⁵ But among all the passions, skeptical philosophy seems to particularly target pride. Hume says in the *Enquiry* that when the learned become obstinate, “a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might *abate their pride*” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). Similarly, Hume’s *Letter to a Gentleman* clarifies that when a

Sceptick... affects to doubt of the Maxims of common Reason, and even of his Senses,... [a]ll he means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of mere human Reasoners... *Modesty* then, and *Humility*, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of Scepticism; not an universal Doubt, which it is impossible for any Man to support.

of belief and evidence” (T 1.4.1.6, SBN 183). Such a “degree of doubt” would clearly be excessive, destroying rather than aiding “just” reasoning. But this occurs only if the checks are repeated to a psychologically untenable degree; “after the first and second decision... the action of the mind becomes forc’d and unnatural” (T 1.4.1.10, SBN 185). In contrast, it is often natural, familiar, and useful to make one or two checks (EHU 10.4, SBN 110–11; EHU 12.4, SBN 150). Each check reduces the liveliness of, and so our confidence in, the conclusions of our reasoning in proportion to the likelihood that the reasoning failed to produce truth or satisfaction. By adding to our stock of experiences of reasoning unsatisfactorily, skeptical philosophy increases the extent to which checks on our reasoning reduce the liveliness of the conclusions of our reasoning. Skeptical philosophy can have this effect without leading to “a total extinction of belief,” as long as we do not perform checks indefinitely. See Hume’s discussions of “the probability of causes” (T 1.3.12 and EHU 6.4, SBN 57–59). For discussion, see Owen (1999), Ch. 8 and LoLordo (2000).

⁵That is, “except the love of truth, and that passion never is, nor can be carried to too high a degree” (EHU 5.1, SBN 41). Presumably, skeptical philosophy would not mortify humility either, since, as I discuss below, it tends to cause humility. Hume probably feels no need to state this further exception because the context and word choice suggest an implicit restriction on the passions at issue. Hume is discussing the “management” or “correction of our manners” through “the passion[s] for philosophy” and “religion.” His use of the word ‘mortified’ evokes the Christian notion of mortification of the flesh, in which the passions leading to sin are denied and extirpated through ascetic practices. In such a context, it would make sense to *explicitly* except curiosity, which Hume wishes to rescue from its reputation as a primary source of sin (Genesis 3:3–6), but not the meek passions. In an ironic twist, Hume portrays skepticism, much maligned as a form of atheism, as pious.

The centrality of pride is further reinforced by the fact that Hume describes dogmatic tendencies using the moralized language of pride. Hume calls dogmatists “haughty” (DNR 12.33, KS 228; cf. EHU 12.24, SBN 161) and equates a “dogmatical spirit” with a “conceited idea of [one’s] own judgment” (T 1.4.7.15, SBN 274). Those who are “positive or dogmatical on any subject” are by the same token “arrogant” and “have there given reins to passion, without that proper deliberation and suspence, which can alone secure them from the grossest absurdities” (EPM 9.13, SBN 278; cf. NHR 12.12, Bea 71). Similarly, Hume tells us that skeptical philosophy is well suited to cure the mind’s “rash arrogance” and “lofty pretensions” (EHU 5.1, SBN 41). It is also an antidote to “that assuming arrogance of philosophy” (DNR 1.2, KS 131), when unconstrained by reflections on its own limitations. Relatedly, Hume describes the metaphysical reasonings which his skeptical conclusions are to forestall as “aris[ing]...from the fruitless efforts of human vanity” (EHU 1.11, SBN 11; cf. “conceit” at EHU 11.21, SBN 141).

To my knowledge, Hume scholarship has hardly acknowledged, much less explained, the indirect, passionate route through which skeptical philosophy is to reform our temperaments. This is not surprising, however, given that Hume is fairly terse about the mechanisms involved. Nor is Hume’s terseness surprising, given that his most explicit connections of skeptical philosophy with pride occur in the first *Enquiry*, which, unlike the *Treatise*, includes no in-depth discussion of the passions. The needed explanation thus requires reconstruction from disparate remarks throughout Hume’s philosophical writings. But the reconstruction is worth the effort. It not only explains how Hume understood the workings of his own philosophy. By connecting skeptical philosophy with pride, it also better explains how, why, when, and to whom Hume thinks skeptical philosophy is useful. The moderation of pride turns out to have many uses, including

but not limited to the correction of belief, eradication of dogmatism, and inculcation of healthy doxastic habits. It also plays an important role in sociability and cooperation. Moreover, if Hume is correct, his account helps to explain the pedagogical value of his own philosophy, and so offers us a reason to read, write about, and teach his thought.

In what follows, I will describe the mechanisms through which skeptical philosophy moderates pride and thus also belief (§2). I will then consider three objections to this account—namely, that Hume would find skeptical philosophy’s moderation of pride to be counterproductive (§3), ineffective (§4), or overkill (§5). I will close by drawing some implications for philosophical pedagogy from Hume’s thought that skeptical philosophy moderates pride (§6).

2 The mechanics of pride, humility, and belief

Explaining how skeptical philosophy’s moderation of pride helps to cure dogmatism involves two stages: first, explaining how skeptical philosophy can moderate pride and, second, explaining how moderating pride has desirable effects on belief or belief forming tendencies. I will begin the first stage by explaining what, on Hume’s account, pride is and how it is produced and regulated.

For Hume, pride is a feeling or, more generically, a perception. It occurs in the mind after we take pleasure in things, or the qualities of things, which we associate with ourselves (cf. T 2.1.6.1, SBN 290). The object of one’s pride is always oneself. But the causes of pride must be something further—not oneself *per se*, but one’s loyal character, good memory, refined taste, precocious children, fast dogs, dazzling clothes, or spacious flat (T 2.1.2.6, SBN 279). More or less anything we take pleasure in can cause pride, so long as it is “in the least ally’d or related to us” (T 2.1.2.5, SBN 279) and so conveys the “idea of ourself” (T 2.1.2.2, SBN 277). In practice, however, we tend

to feel pride only in things that we consider to be “peculiar to ourselves” (T 2.1.6.4, SBN 291). So even if I take pleasure in my proficient cooking or new copy of Hume’s *Treatise* and see those things as mine, I may not feel pride in them if I consider them common or unexceptional. Hume calls the process by which we determine whether our things are better or rarer than others’ “comparison.” It turns out that we “judge of objects more from comparison than from their real and intrinsic merit” (T 2.1.6.4, SBN 291; cf. T 3.3.2.4, SBN 593). As a result, we do not feel pride in many of our agreeable, albeit undistinguished, character traits, abilities, and possessions.

Like any perception of the mind, pride can be more or less lively or forceful.⁶ Pride can thus be moderated by augmenting or, more typically, diminishing its forcefulness. If pride’s forcefulness is lowered sufficiently, the perception is annihilated altogether.

Pride’s forcefulness can be diminished in two ways. First, one can prevent the production or enlivening of pride. In the simplest case, this involves removing a cause of pride, either by destroying it or by severing its association with the person who would take pride in it. For example, I can prevent your taking pride in your beautiful, new car if I smash it to bits or steal it. The production of pride may also be prevented by changing a person’s estimation of the qualities of things she associates with herself. If I convince you that your car is ugly, it may cease to produce pride. But even if you continue to find it beautiful, I may change your sense that it is outstanding in this regard by buying very beautiful cars for all your friends. Finally, the production of pride can be prevented by changing a person’s mood or temperament, such that she is unlikely to take pleasure in her things, notice their tie to herself,⁷ or compare them favorably against others’. If I depress you by reading news headlines or distract you with an engaging story, it may take your mind off your car and its exceptional beauty.

⁶For descriptions of pride as having or changing with respect to “force” or “strength,” see T 2.1.2.3, SBN 278; T 2.1.6.7, SBN 293; T 2.1.9.5, SBN 306; T 2.1.9.12, SBN 308; T 2.1.11.9, SBN 321.

⁷Though “the idea of ourselves is always intimately present to us” (T 2.2.4.7, SBN 354), the strength or facility of its associations with other things may vary according to one’s prevailing temperament.

Second, pride can be diminished by introducing the opposite feeling, humility. Humility results when things we associate with ourselves cause us pain or are found, through comparison, to be notably worse than others' (T 2.1.2.2, SBN 277; cf. T 2.1.8.8, SBN 302–03). Hume says that since pride and humility

are directly contrary, . . . opposition and contrariety must destroy both. . . [T]he passions either take place alternately; or if they encounter, the one annihilates the other, as far as its strength goes, and the remainder only of that, which is superior, continues to operate upon the mind.

T 2.1.2.3, SBN 278

It is possible for the mind to oscillate between pride and humility. This is particularly common “where [a person] has different reasons for [i.e., causes of] these passions” (T 2.1.2.3, SBN 277), as when she first feels pride in her exceptionally luscious garden, then humility in her poor hearing, then pride in her collection of rare books, and so on. But when the two feelings appear in the mind simultaneously, the force or strength of one diminishes the force or strength of the other until at least one is annihilated, leaving the other less forceful.

Hume describes skeptical philosophy as moderating pride both by curbing the production of pride and by producing humility.

First, it can curb the production of pride in those who consider themselves particularly intelligent compared to others. Such is often the case with the “Learned,” a “stubborn independent Race of Mortals” who distinguish themselves from others by having “chosen for their Portion the higher and more difficult Operations of the Mind” (EW 6, Mil 535; EW 1, Mil 533). The learned tend to feel pride by comparing their intelligence, culture, or intellectual accomplishments against those of the greater part of humanity. Indeed, “genius and learning are *pleasant* and *magnificent* objects, and

by both these circumstances are adapted to pride and vanity” (T 2.2.10.7, SBN 391–92).⁸ Skeptical philosophy, Hume tells us, is to “abate [the learned’s] pride, by shewing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). Skeptical philosophy’s lessons about human ignorance change what passions are produced when the learned compare their intelligence to others’. Any relative superiority in intelligence is made microscopic, “if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). In other words, when appreciating how far we all fall below an imagined ideal of intelligence, relatively higher intelligence no longer appears to be exceptionally higher. We all seem to be on more or less the same level. So comparisons of intelligence can no longer produce pride.⁹

Second, by confronting us with our own ignorance, skeptical philosophy is apt to make us feel humility. As Hume says, “ignorance and simplicity are *disagreeable* and *mean*, which... gives them a double connexion with humility” (T 2.2.10.7, SBN 392). Now, it may be that our finding our own ignorance to be common to all human beings at least partially insulates us from feeling humility. That is how Hume thinks it goes for illness:

bodily pain and sickness are in themselves proper causes of humility; tho’ the custom of estimating every thing by comparison more than by its intrinsic worth and value, makes us overlook these calamities, which we find to be incident to every one.

⁸I treat ‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ as synonymous, as I believe is indicated by Hume’s repeated set-phrase “pride and vanity” (T 2.1.3.4, SBN 281; T 2.1.9.12, SBN 308; T 2.1.10.2, SBN 310; T 2.2.4.8, SBN 355; T 2.2.10.6, SBN 391; T 2.2.10.7, SBN 392; DP 2.28, Bea 12; DP 2.31, Bea 13; DP 4.4, Bea 21). For an argument that pride and vanity are conceptually distinct for Hume, see Galvagni (2020).

⁹Though Hume does not say this, skeptical philosophy could, in the same way, also *maintain* lower pride in those who do not already favorably estimate their intellectual ability. This gives it a use to anyone capable of following skeptical arguments. To the “illiterate,” Hume prescribes simply comparing their intellectual capacities with those of the learned (EHU 12.24, SBN 161).

Still, as “proper causes of humility,” illness and ignorance may nonetheless cause humility, at least when one does not attend to their universality. Hume seems to allow for this possibility when he says that “*Humility*, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of Scepticism” (L 21, Nor 425–26). If skepticism, and the philosophy which inculcates it, can produce humility, it can moderate pride.

How, then, does the moderation of pride correct dogmatism? We have already seen that Hume describes dogmatism in terms of excessive pride, suggesting a connection. But what is that connection?

For Hume, belief is a lively idea which receives some of its liveliness from its customary association with a present impression (T 1.3.6.15, SBN 93; T 1.3.7.5–6, SBN 96–97; EHU 5.13, SBN 50). It turns out that the passions exert a great influence on what we end up believing:

As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions in their turn are very favourable to belief; and not only such facts as convey agreeable emotions, but very often such as give pain, do upon that account become more readily the objects of faith and opinion.

T 1.3.10.4, SBN 120

A coward’s fear, for example, makes him “readily assent to every account of danger he meets with.” Fear enlivens the idea of a bear which he forms in response to his impression of rustling leaves. He may then believe that a bear is in the nearby woods, even if he has never seen one. In this case, his passion causes him to form a belief which has little grounding in his past experience. Similarly, “surprize... vivifies and enlivens the idea” which it attends by immediately transferring some of its force—a fact exploited by “quacks” to win the public’s “faith” in their miracle cures (T 1.3.10.4,

SBN 120). The same transfer can occur from a forceful impression of pride to ideas which occur in the mind simultaneously or successively. Additionally, Hume says that people with “warm imaginations” embrace “hypotheses . . . merely for being specious and agreeable” (T 1.4.7.14, SBN 272).¹⁰ Pride is an agreeable passion (T 2.1.5.8–9, SBN 288). If our opinions begin to elicit pride, they become more agreeable to us by association with the pride they cause. This then naturally strengthens our embrace of them, regardless of our past experience.

But why would we become prideful of our opinions? All that is required on Hume’s account, it would seem, is that we take some pleasure in them, view them as our own, and see them as better than others’ or else unique to ourselves. This last condition seems particularly dangerous, since one may begin to feel pride in an opinion merely because others do not hold it. And the resulting pride may be sufficient to start a troubling reinforcement loop, enlivening the belief without any evidence. It is easy to see, then, how a person’s enjoyment of having some contrarian opinions could quickly devolve into a rigid dogmatism.

Luckily, there is an opposed mechanism which may counteract this route into dogmatism. Just as comparison encourages us to embrace rare opinions, sympathy—the natural “communication of sentiments”—encourages us to embrace ones that are more prevalent, at least in our own communities. Hume says: “So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree” (T 3.3.2.2, SBN 592). Unfortunately, this sympathetic mechanism has less purchase on those who are already very prideful. People with “a fond opinion of themselves” tend for that reason to have a “prejudice against antagonists,” whose opinions they do not

¹⁰An extreme but illustrative case is the “consecration” of “every whimsey” by those “heated by zeal and enthusiasm” (SE 3, Mil 74; EHU 10.27n25.5, SBN 344–45; cf. T 1.3.10.8–11, SBN 122–23, 631–32). Hume lists “pride” as a central cause of enthusiasm (SE 3, Mil 74; SE 6, Mil 76).

take seriously (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). Their pride must be moderated before exchange with others can free them from dogmatism.

Without external checks on pride, then, sympathy has little power to counteract dogmatism. Worse yet, it can lead to a second, socially mediated, pride-driven reinforcement loop. This commonly occurs when we form what Hume calls “factions” or “parties from *principle*” (PG 9–12, Mil 59–61). When people begin to identify themselves positively with, and so to take pride in, their membership in a group of people with similar political or religious beliefs, their natural openness to sympathy with others is replaced by sympathy with a much more limited group. This narrow sympathy then reinforces the shared beliefs, which makes the party members more “shocked and disturbed by any contrariety” (PG 12, Mil 61), and so less receptive to differing opinion.¹¹ Moreover, since sympathy is “the soul or animating principle” of pride, enlivening pride by communicating it between persons (T 2.2.5.15, SBN 363), it perpetually strengthens the common pride party members take in their membership. Their finding this pride agreeable incentivizes their associating primarily with fellow members, further calcifying their shared beliefs. Until the pride in party membership is removed or weakened, sympathetic exchange tends to exacerbate rather than diminish dogmatism.

As we have already seen, skeptical philosophy is well suited to that end. By curbing the production of pride and counterposing it with humility, such philosophy can break dogmatical reasoners out of pride-driven reinforcement loops, both individual and social.

¹¹On Hume’s concerns with political and religious factions, the role of sympathy in their formation, and his attempts to moderate party zeal, see Herdt (1997), Schleifer McCormick (2013), and Fosl (2019), Ch. 6.

3 The counterproductiveness objection

In claiming that Hume took the moderation of pride to be a valuable effect of skeptical philosophy, I may seem to be pitting Hume against himself. After all, Hume is often and rightfully viewed as defending pride against the assaults of the prevailing Christian Stoicism of his time and place.¹² In the *Treatise*, he emphasizes that pride is both useful and agreeable to its possessors. For Hume, “a due degree of pride” makes its possessor feel “elated” and “elevated” and lends her “confidence and assurance in all [her] projects and enterprizes” (T 2.1.2.2, SBN 277; 3.3.2.8, SBN 596–97; 3.3.2.14, SBN 600). These qualities make pride, or a disposition toward feeling proud of one’s actual merits, a subject of moral approbation, transforming that disposition into a virtue. “Nothing,” Hume concludes, “can be more laudable, than to have a value for ourselves, where we really have qualities that are valuable” (T 3.3.2.8, SBN 596). Similarly, in the second *Enquiry*, he says that “a generous spirit and self-value, [if] well founded. . . , is a great excellency” (EPM 8.10, SBN 265).

Moreover, our enjoyment of pride or vanity makes us seek the approbation of others, which in turn incentivizes the development of further virtues. Hume says:

vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former.

DM 11, Mil 86

Virtues are “the most obvious causes” of pride (T 2.1.7.2, SBN 295). So those who desire to experience well-founded pride are thus motivated to cultivate virtues, espe-

¹²Baier (1991), 205–10. As Taylor (2015), 131–42 emphasizes, Hume also resists more secular accounts of pride as a vice, such as those of Hobbes and Mandeville.

cially socially visible ones.¹³ Would Hume really want to moderate what he says is “to be esteem’d a social passion and the bond of Union of men” (T 3.2.2.12, SBN 491)? That would seem to be counterproductive on Hume’s view. I call this the *counterproductiveness objection*.

For Hume, whether “the passions of *pride* or *humility*” constitute “vice or virtue. . . lies in their excesses or just proportion” (T 3.3.2.1, SBN 592). Though a certain degree of pride is agreeable and useful to its possessor and functions as a kind of social glue, too much is unpleasant and alienating: “The vicious excess of the. . . virtue [of pride], namely, insolence or haughtiness, is immediately disagreeable to others” (EPM 8.10, SBN 265; cf. EPM App4.3n66.1, SBN 314). Wherever pride is excessive, it could benefit from the kind of moderation skeptical philosophy offers.

As it turns out, excessive pride is quite common. So, too, then, is the need for its moderation. Hume makes these points consistently throughout his various writings. “Men,” Hume says in the second *Enquiry*, “have, in general, a much greater propensity to over-value than under-value themselves” (EPM 8.9, SBN 264). In the *Treatise*, he calls this propensity to be “seduc’d into a good opinion of ourselves, and of all objects, that belong to us,” a “great propensity. . . to pride” (T 2.2.4.8, SBN 354). The result is nearly universal “over-weaning conceit. . . : Every one almost has a strong propensity to this vice” (T 3.3.2.10, SBN 597–98). Again, in the *Essays*, Hume explains that nearly all of us could then benefit from methods for moderating “presumption and arrogance, so natural to the human mind” (RP 31, Mil 126).

Such moderation is important for preserving and restoring not only individual virtue, but also societal cooperation. This is because excessive pride has pernicious, antisocial effects. Manifestations of pride, Hume explains, “tend to cause uneasiness in others” by making them feel weak “by means of comparison.” As a result, “the

¹³For discussion, see Besser-Jones (2010) and Reed (2012).

proud can never endure the proud” (T 3.3.2.7, SBN 596). Overly proud people, who exhibit their pride but feel uncomfortable humility from others’ exhibitions, thus tend to isolate from one another.

Naturally excessive pride’s tendency toward breaking company apart thus poses a threat to the continuous social intercourse which Hume took to be central to modern commercial society. But its effects on the production and communication of knowledge are particularly strong. Those ends are enhanced by free and fluid proliferation of diverse perspectives through sympathetic exchange. “Philosophy,” for instance, “chiefly flourishes from the free opposition of sentiments and argumentation” (EHU 11.2, SBN 132).¹⁴ But such exchange is hindered by excessive pride in various ways. Our general inaptitude for enduring each other’s pride makes prolonged communication difficult. And the support pride offers for our dogmatic opinions further closes our minds to the insights of others. A more moderate pride, in contrast, would avoid these social ills while preserving the passion’s personal benefits, including the ambition to make advancements in knowledge.

4 The ineffectiveness objection

In viewing skepticism as well suited to moderating our passions, I view Hume as disagreeing with the narrator of his essay “The Sceptic,” when she heavily qualifies philosophy’s use as “*medicine for the mind*.” According to her, not only does philosophy have no use for “the ignorant and thoughtless part of mankind,” but its “authority” over even “the wise and thoughtful” is “very weak and limited” (Sc 28, Mil 169). Many interpreters view Hume as agreeing with his imagined Sceptic on these points. According to Robert Fogelin, the Sceptic is really Hume himself “under the thinnest possible dis-

¹⁴This is Hume’s rationale for insisting that political and religious toleration drives advancement in the sciences (T Intro.7, SBN xvii; EHU 11.29, SBN 147; H 37.2; DNR 12.21, KS 223).

guise;” “the rhetorical point of the essay is . . . to point out that philosophical thought, i.e., abstruse reflection, can have little effect” on our passions and habits.¹⁵ Similarly, for M.A. Stewart, “the author’s persona comes through . . . transparently;” the Sceptic’s point that “reflections of philosophy are too subtle and distant to . . . eradicate any affection” (Sc 36, Mil 172) is also “Hume’s point.”¹⁶ James Harris writes that the essay “presents in dramatized form the bankruptcy of the ancient conception of moral philosophy as a means of curing the soul.”¹⁷ Such interpreters articulate grounds for thinking that Hume denies, or at least severely minimizes, philosophy’s role in moderating our passions, presumably including pride. I call this the *ineffectiveness objection*.

I think Hume’s stating that skeptical philosophy “might abate [the] pride” of those inclined to “haughtiness and obstinacy” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161) leaves little room to doubt whether he thought philosophy could do just that. If it can, it can be medicine for the mind. It can act on the passions and, in doing so, cure certain unhealthy mental dispositions.

Interpreters often appeal to Hume’s four essays on human happiness as strong evidence that Hume believed philosophy cannot reform our passions. In “The Epicurean,” “The Stoic,” “The Platonist,” and “The Sceptic,” Hume enacts a sort of contest of eloquence in which characters inspired by the four Hellenistic sects take turns describing the best kind of life or proper object of the will. The Epicurean describes a life of pleasures; the Stoic a life of virtue and self-perfection; the Platonist a life of spiritual devotion (Ep n1, Mil 138; Sto n1, Mil 146; Pl n1, Mil 155). The Sceptic, who gets the last word, denies that any one pursuit can make everyone happy, emphasizing the dependence on variable “humour and inclination” (Sc 4, Mil 160). That last word

¹⁵Fogelin (1985), 119, 121–22.

¹⁶Stewart (1991), 278, 284.

¹⁷Harris (2007), 229. See also Black (2010), 11–12; Walker (2013), 891–92; Berry (2019), 242–43. For readings of Hume on which philosophy can moderate the passions, see Immerwahr (1989), 317ff; Heydt (2007), 13–15; Lloyd (2013), 70–72; Watkins (2019), esp. 96–104; Goldhaber (2022), 51–53; Qu (2022).

can seem to express Hume’s doubts about philosophy’s use in reforming our tempers; philosophy cannot even point out the virtuous life, much less inculcate virtue.¹⁸

Plausibly, however, the eloquence contest has no clear victor. Indeed, each speech can appear both compelling and questionable, giving the reader little guidance overall about how to live. Even a reader with leanings toward one character is likely to find both faults in their speech and a grain of truth in another’s, making wholesale agreement with any difficult. The reader is likely to be at a loss.¹⁹ But that seems to me to be exactly the point. What Hume succeeds at communicating with his quartet is not guidance about which life is really the best, but rather the sheer difficulty—perhaps impossibility—of deciding. Our human faculties may be too weak for that. And that can be a humbling discovery. In this regard, the quartet can be viewed as a composition of skeptical philosophy.²⁰

Supporting this reading is the fact that all four characters show the marks of ex-

¹⁸This reading finds support from Hume’s elsewhere criticizing overly rosy expectations about philosophy’s utility for living well. But these criticisms are plausibly aimed more narrowly at the Stoic tradition and, in particular, its prime virtue of “undisturbed philosophical tranquillity, superior to pain, sorrow, anxiety, and each assault of adverse fortune.” For Hume, such a virtue is mythical. It is “far too magnificent for human nature” (EPM 7.16, SBN 256; cf. EHU 8.34, SBN 101). For discussion, see Watkins (2009), 395–97 and Goldhaber (2022), 49–50. Moreover, attempts to inculcate it produce vice in the place of virtue (EHU 5.1, SBN 40; MP 3, Mil 540). But not all attempts to better the mind through philosophy need to aim at undisturbed tranquility or entirely controllable, inward pleasure. In particular, skeptical philosophy need not. On the contrary, it may emphasize our incapacity to satisfy such an aim. And, according to Hume, this discovery can function as medicine.

¹⁹If the essays’ conflicting advice does not already confound their reader, she may find perplexing the fact that each essay appears to buckle under its own pressure and disintegrate near its end. When contemplating death, the Epicurean’s amorous pleasure coverts into unresolved anxiety (Ep 16, Mil 144–45); the Stoic’s choice of virtue for its own sake into glory-seeking nationalism (Sto 17–20; 152–54); the Platonist’s pious worship into self-righteous misanthropy (Pl 6–7, Mil 157–58). Even the mature Sceptic’s humane toleration smacks of nihilism when she concludes that “human life” is “overvalued” and should “be regarded more as a dull pastime than as a serious occupation” (Sc 55, Mil 180).

²⁰These essays may perhaps count as philosophy in the “easy” sense, as opposed to the “abstruse” sense, insofar as they “borrow all helps from poetry and eloquence” and aim at “regulat[ing] our sentiments.” But, unlike most “easy” philosophy, they do not achieve that aim simply by “paint[ing] virtue] in the most amiable colours” (E 1.1, SBN 5–6). Though some of the speakers may individually attempt this kind of philosophy, *together* they do not make any one virtue or kind of life appear the most attractive. Moreover, the fact that even abstract skeptical philosophy can aim at regulating our sentiments can make us wonder how hard and fast Hume’s distinction between these types of philosophy actually is. On whether the two types can be combined, see Abramson (2006).

cessive pride. According to Hume,

those, who have an ill-grounded conceit of themselves, are for ever making those comparisons, nor have they any other method of supporting their vanity. A man of sense and merit is pleas'd with himself, independent of all foreign considerations: But a fool must always find some person, that is more foolish, in order to keep himself in good humour with his own parts and understanding.

T 3.3.2.7, SBN 596

All of Hume's speakers exhibit a need to ridicule their interlocutors' views in order to express confidence in their own, albeit to varying degrees. This can be seen as an effect of "ill-grounded conceit"—of folly cloaked in prideful comparison. The Epicurean, for example, anticipating the Stoic's speech, exclaims:

Away then with all those vain pretences of making ourselves happy within ourselves, of feasting on our own thoughts, of being satisfied with the consciousness of well-doing, and of despising all assistance and all supplies from external objects. This is the voice of Pride, not of Nature.

Ep 6, Mil 140

The Stoic then responds to the Epicurean's injunction to live a more "natural" life by commanding her to "return also to thy savage manners, to thy timorous superstition, to thy brutal ignorance; and sink thyself below those animals, whose condition thou admirest, and wouldest so fondly imitate" (Sto 2, Mil 147). Such insults form a large part of the speakers' arguments for their own position, giving the impression that their position rests more on vanity than insight. The Platonist continues the trend, spending few words on anything besides vitriol for the other speakers, making him perhaps

appear the most foolish or repulsive. And though the Sceptic is more even-keeled and even emphasizes her partial agreement with the Stoic, her quick rejection of many broadly Stoical philosophical maxims evidently “carries the matter too far,” prompting a corrective footnote highlighting her oversight of many maxims which can “fortify that temper” (Sc 51n6.1, Mil 177). Moreover, as we saw with the Epicurean, the insults often express irritation at others’ pride. That, for Hume, further suggests the presence of “ill-grounded self-conceit,” given that “’tis our own pride, which makes us so much displeas’d with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain” (T 3.3.2.7, SBN 596). When we are plagued with such excessive pride, the philosophical quest for the best life appears hopeless, degenerating into little more than slander.

Note that this discovery is more deeply skeptical than the Sceptic’s denial that there is any proper object of the will. It may be that there is a proper object, only human weakness prevents us from discovering it. Moreover, by leading to such a skeptical discovery, the essays themselves offer a rejoinder to the Sceptic’s pessimism about philosophy’s use as medicine of the mind. If I am right, reading all four essays together is apt to instill a sense of perplexity in the reader, along with an awareness of “the narrowness of [her] understanding. . . [and] passions” (Sc 2, Mil 160). Such self-awareness naturally moderates the reader’s pride, curbing her sense of superiority in judgments about how to live, and promoting her ability to get along with those who live different kinds of lives. Ironically, it is the Sceptic who overlooks this application of skeptical philosophy.

5 The overkill objection

Hume’s warnings about the dangers of skepticism are nearly as famous as his skeptical arguments.²¹ In the “Conclusion” to *Treatise* Book I, for instance, Hume describes a survey of his own skeptical conclusions as “reduc[ing him] almost to despair,” leaving him in an intense “philosophical melancholy and delirium,” and “ready to reject all belief and reasoning” (T 1.4.7.1, SBN 264; T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269; T 1.4.7.8, SBN 268). Interestingly, excessive skepticism here seems to work largely through excessive humility. In the throes of melancholy, Hume “fanc[ies him]self some strange uncouth monster.” With such a low self-estimation, he “feel[s] all [his] opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the approbation of others” (T 1.4.7.2, SBN 264). Appreciating Hume’s “deplorable” condition (T 1.4.7.8, SBN 269) in this “Conclusion” furnishes a natural objection: Might skeptical philosophy provide too strong a corrective to excessive pride? Isn’t it apt to produce excessive humility in its stead? I call this the *overkill objection*.

The objection is made more pressing by noting that Hume acknowledges alternative ways of counteracting pride—for instance, reflection on the inevitability of death or disease. In both the *Treatise* and *Dissertation on the Passions*, Hume writes that “no topic is so proper to mortify human pride, and make us entertain a mean opinion of our nature, than this, that we are every moment of our lives subject to . . . infirmities” (T 2.1.8.8, SBN 302; DP 2.44, Bea 16; cf. EPM 6.28n33.1, SBN 245–46). Might reflections on death or illness provide a milder corrective to pride than skeptical philosophy does—

²¹Perhaps most famous are Hume’s claims that “all human life must perish, were [skeptical] principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence” (EHU 12.23, SBN 160; cf. EHU 5.6, SBN 44–45; EPM 9.13, SBN 278). I leave these aside, as they all involve a strict adherence to “skeptical principles,” which Hume takes to be psychologically impossible. Here, I am concerned with the possibly dangerous effects of experiencing our own ignorance.

one that is less likely to overshoot the mark?

Hume's answer to this objection is that skeptical philosophy is difficult to sustain and thus unlikely to produce excessive humility. There are several related reasons for this. First, many of the stronger skeptical arguments, including Hume's own in the *Treatise*, are subtle, long, and difficult. "No wonder," Hume concludes, that "the 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" (T 1.4.1.11, SBN 186). Such difficult arguments put "the attention... on stretch," make "the posture of the mind... uneasy," and "divert" the "spirits... from their natural course." In other words, the forcefulness of their conclusions is diminished by the mind's opposition to such "forc'd and unnatural" reflections (T 1.4.1.10, SBN 185).²² Relatively weak conviction in our ignorance will then have relatively light effects on our pride.

Second, skeptical conclusions are quickly counteracted by more natural kinds of belief formation. Skeptical philosophy can lead us to distrust the evidence of the senses or of our own reasoning. But our natural propensity to form beliefs upon such evidence is strong and steady enough to overcome this distrust and restore a great measure of our beliefs. In fact, this happens as soon as the exigencies of life demand we turn our attention away from philosophy. As Hume puts it, the "principles" of skeptical philosophy "vanish like smoke" in the face of "the occupations of common life" (EHU 12.21, SBN 158–59). And, given that such exigencies are bound to arise, "nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having

²²Hume is here discussing the rather distinctive argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1, which, perhaps due to its elaborateness, has no analogue in the more streamlined first *Enquiry*. See note 4 for discussion. Still, I find it natural to read Hume's claims as applicable to any "subtile reasonings," given his similar remarks elsewhere. For example, he says that "a long chain of connected arguments" diminishes "conviction" in its conclusion (T 1.3.13.3, SBN 144). Not all skeptical arguments are so "subtile." Some involve only the "slightest philosophy" (EHU 12.9, SBN 152). Other "sceptical objections" are "popular," rather than genuinely "*philosophical*." But "these objections are but weak," lacking the force to produce any lasting doubt or sense of our ignorance (EHU 12.21, SBN 158–59).

any considerable influence on the understanding” (T 1.4.1.12, SBN 187). The same goes for the resulting passions.

Other methods of producing humility do not share these advantages. While the exigencies of life may cut short reflections on the inevitability of death or disease, we do not find our common experience to contradict it. Family and friends fall ill and die; headlines display the casualties of wars and epidemics; as we grow older, death and disease feel nearer, enhancing rather than counteracting our reflections. That can make those reflections go sour. As Hume’s Sceptic puts it: “If by close and intense meditation we render them [i.e., death and illness] present and intimate to us, *that* is the true secret for poisoning all our pleasures, and rendering us perpetually miserable” (Sc 42, Mil 174). In contrast, even intense skeptical reflections and the profound humility they inspire naturally dissipate. Hume observes of his own skeptical gloom that “nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures [him] of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of [his] senses, which obliterate all these chimeras.” All Hume needs are “three or four hour’s amusement” and “a *reverie* in [his] chamber, or solitary walk by a river-side” in order to again “feel an ambition to arise in [him] of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by [his] inventions and discoveries” (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269; T 1.4.7.12, SBN 270–71). His sense of pride naturally returns sufficiently to motivate his seeking out fame.

That skeptical philosophy’s stronger effects weaken over time increases its value as medicine. The need to moderate pride, while common, is not constant. Nonetheless, Hume views a natural recovery from even intense skepticism to be enduringly salutary. He describes a healthy “*mitigated* scepticism, . . . which may be both durable and useful,” as a “result of this. . . *excessive* scepticism.” The former comes about when the latter’s “undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense

and reflection” (EHU 12.24, SBN 161). Likewise, for the overly prideful, a stable and accurate sense of one’s own merits might come about through a temporary excess of humility—a truly humiliating reality check, as it were. In this regard, skeptical philosophy is a bitter medicine, a bit like a purgative or chemotherapy. These medicines appear to do harm—and indeed would be harmful, were they not the proper treatment of some infirmity. But, by producing a temporary extreme, they help to bring about a lasting balance.²³

6 Pedagogical upshots

Hume never spells out in detail how skeptical philosophy’s moderation of pride is to correct our doxastic habits. But, as I have argued, he has ample resources for doing so (§2). The existence of these resources need not contradict his moderate stances toward the value of pride (§3) and philosophy’s capacity for moderating the passions (§§4–5).

If Hume’s claims about skeptical philosophy’s effects on the passions are psychologically accurate, this would have important upshots for philosophical pedagogy. First, it would give us a reason to include philosophical discussions of skepticism in our teaching and research beyond the intrinsic theoretical interest of such discussions. Moreover, since it would place value specifically on the inculcation of skepticism, a sense of human ignorance could, at least sometimes, be an appropriate goal or terminus of a class discussion. After all, inculcating this sense would, if Hume is right, combat dogmatic thinking, and help to foster a community of letters in which people, having been to some degree humbled by their experience of skepticism, become genuinely receptive to the ideas of others. Skeptical philosophy would then have an important place in liberal

²³For a reading on which Hume’s skepticism can restore a healthy balance, see Goldhaber (2021). On the evolution of Hume’s attitudes toward the durability of skepticism and its effects on our doxastic dispositions, see Ribeiro (2009) and Qu (2020).

and humanistic education.

Second, and relatedly, Hume’s reflections would give us a reason to keep philosophy *hard*. Struggling with difficult topics, running into contradictions, and ending in *aporia* would be of value not only when we come out on the other side.²⁴ A sense of confusion, locatable in even history’s greatest thinkers, could be part of the value of philosophical education. And we might better produce this sense when we refuse to simplify or eschew the more difficult, obscure topics or texts—whether overtly skeptical or not—and even model our own confusion in the classroom. I think this can be an encouraging thought for those of us who teach modern philosophy.

It is important not to take these suggestions too far, however. Even assuming that Hume is right about skeptical philosophy’s role in moderating pride, there may be countervailing considerations against creating too much confusion in the classroom. I for one am less confident than Hume is that the humiliation of skeptical philosophy will dissipate when leaving the study or seminar room, especially when students are evaluated on how clearly or coherently they can discuss philosophical ideas and figures. On the contrary, I think preconceptions about philosophy’s inaccessibility and more general tendencies toward student discouragement can pose serious barriers against students’ fully engaging with philosophy courses. An excessive emphasis on confusion exacerbates these barriers. But this is no complaint against Hume. He did not think that a skeptical moderation of pride was philosophy’s only or even primary merit. And evidently he found a place for what he called “easy” philosophy, which seems less apt for inculcating skepticism than the more “abstruse” variety propounded in the *Treatise* and defended at the beginning of the first *Enquiry*.²⁵

Hume’s attitude toward skeptical philosophy and the lessons I am suggesting we take

²⁴Following Hume, I have focused on the humbling effects of confusion. But it can also play a role in spurring interest and emotional investment in inquiry. See Fahy (2006) and McAllister (2018).

²⁵See note 20 above.

from it differ notably from the attitude which currently dominates our field. Skepticism is now often viewed as an outmoded overreaction to the limitations of now debunked early modern theories of mind—a threat from bygone days, better left to history. Where skepticism is still taken seriously, it is often treated as a problem to be solved or an indication that one’s theory of knowledge requires correction. In either case, it is seen as a dead end whose value is exhausted by its showing us where not to tread.

Surely, there is some insight in this attitude. A theory of mind or knowledge which does not by itself rule out our knowing many familiar things is at least *prima facie* better for it. And I suspect that this point is particularly pertinent to assessing the merits and limitations of Hume’s own theses about our basic mental items and their dynamics. Nonetheless, the attitude easily obscures skeptical philosophy’s important utility in developing our and our students’ temperaments. That is something Hume’s philosophy can help us to see. Moreover, bringing about intellectual humility is something Hume’s “very sceptical” philosophy is itself useful for. Both these points will be true regardless of whether his skeptical conclusions constitute grounds for rejecting his British empiricist approach to the mind. Both are reasons to keep reading Hume.²⁶

²⁶For helpful comments, I thank Eugene Chislenko, Graham Clay, Will Conner, Bridger Ehli, Don Garrett, Taro Okamura, Margaret Watkins, participants in the Early Moderns on the Power of Philosophy Workshop at University College Dublin, and audiences at University of Pittsburgh and New York University, Shanghai.

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