

Nathan I. Sasser, *Hume and the Demands of Philosophy: Science, Skepticism, and Moderation*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, pp. x + 191, ISBN 9781793623218. Hardback, \$100.

In the remarkable ‘Conclusion’ to Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume pauses to survey some of the discoveries he has just made about the human understanding. His having found the ‘trivial’ imagination to be a root cause of our beliefs, as well as several ‘errors’ and ‘dilemmas,’ produces in him a profound doubt (T 1.4.7.4–8, SBN 265–69). He reports: ‘The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another’ (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269). Within just a few pages, however, Hume’s ‘belief in the general maxims of the world’ and even his ‘ambition...of contributing to the instruction of mankind’ have returned (T 1.4.7.11, SBN 270; T 1.4.7.13, SBN 272). He immediately resumes his naturalistic study of human nature in Book II’s account of the passions, apparently no longer concerned by the sceptical implications of his discoveries in Book I.

Any interpreter of Hume’s epistemology, if not his philosophy at large, must reckon with the significance of this curious transformation. If Hume’s philosophy leads to sceptical conclusions which undermine that very philosophy, how can he go on with it? Does he come to view those conclusions as unsound or answerable, and so ultimately undamaging to the philosophical enterprise (à la interpretations by Annette Baier 1991, Don Garrett 1997, and others)? Does he merely ignore the conclusions, creating irreconcilable moments in his thought (Robert Fogelin 2009)? Or does he accept them, continuing his naturalistic project only with an air of detachment or irony (Janet Broughton 2004)? Similar questions arise for *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which also devotes considerable attention to the sceptical implications of its study of the human mind (e.g., EHU 12.23, SBN 159–60).

Nathan Sasser offers a fresh answer to these questions. His careful, concise, and clear *Hume and the Demands of Philosophy: Science, Skepticism, and Moderation* ‘argue[s] that Hume is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs but that he gives a purely practical justification for continuing to hold them’ (15; cf. 17). Core beliefs are those ‘practically indispensable both for ordinary life and for scientific inquiry’ (3) – particularly, ‘sensory beliefs and the deliverances of reason’ (15). On Sasser’s reading, there is no inconsistency in Hume’s continuing to believe or work out the claims of his science of man even after he has given arguments which show that those very claims are not ‘epistemologically justified.’ Hume can endorse his sceptical arguments while also holding that we have a ‘practical rationale for carrying on with common life and with scientific research’ (15).

This ‘purely practical reading of Hume’s response to skepticism’ (18) is so natural and compelling that it is almost surprising that Sasser is offering its *first* systematic, book-length defence. Filling a real gap, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on Hume’s scepticism and naturalism. It is also a timely one, insofar as it invites comparison of Hume’s thought with a recent trend in contemporary epistemology of combining or supplanting epistemic norms with practical ones. Some proponents of this shift (e.g., Susanna Rinard 2022) even invoke Hume as inspiration; they may be right to do so, if Sasser’s reading is correct.

And there are ample reasons to think it is. Crucially, the purely practical reading receives powerful textual support within the ‘Conclusion’ itself. While his philosophical ambitions are returning, Hume discusses two practical reasons to engage in philosophy, one personal and one public: Philosophy is pleasant to those inclined to it, and it provides an alternative to dangerous superstition (112–13, 117–18; T 1.4.7.13–14, SBN 272–73). Practical considerations also abound in Hume’s discussions of ‘sceptical philosophy’ in the first *Enquiry* (165–68; esp. EHU 12.24–25, SBN 161–62). But while Sasser and Hume discuss philosophy’s practical benefits, they also emphasise its dangers. After all, it is philosophy which leads us to conclude that our core beliefs lack epistemological justification. Holding only beliefs which meet philosophy’s own rigorous standards would leave us without any beliefs in material body or causes and effects. That would be disastrous, since it would deprive us of the beliefs needed to live out our lives (104–10; EHU 12.23, SBN 160). For Sasser’s Hume, then, ‘intellectual and practical interests, the demands of philosophy and the demands of life’ come apart substantially (20). And when they diverge, we should side with life, not philosophy. As Sasser notes, Hume’s point here ‘is still a provocative message, perhaps most of all to professional philosophers’ (20).

Sasser offers a unified reading on which both the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* develop a purely practical response to scepticism. The parallelism is reflected in his book’s structure. Parts I (Chs. 1–5) and II (Chs. 6–7) discuss the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, respectively. In both Parts, Sasser argues, first, that the norms Hume attributes to philosophy are properly epistemological norms (Chs. 2 and 6); second, that Hume’s sceptical arguments show that our core beliefs fall short of those norms (Chs. 3–4 and most of Ch. 7); and, third, that Hume gives a purely practical response to those arguments (Ch. 5 and the final pages of Ch. 7). Ch. 1 introduces the basics of Hume’s philosophy of mind in *Treatise* Book I. Parts I and II are bookended by a substantive, orienting Introduction, which situates Sasser’s purely practical reading within the literature on Hume’s scepticism and naturalism, and a brief concluding chapter (Ch. 8) on what Hume hoped to accomplish with his sceptical philosophy.

The book has many merits. The writing is consistently clear and concise. Readings are defended with nearly exhaustive quotations of the key passages in Hume. While these quotations occasionally verge on undigested lists (e.g., 111–12), they are mostly well integrated into the narrative and demonstrate the fastidiousness of Sasser’s research. Relatedly, Sasser is responsible about locating his view within the literature. This occurs foremost in the Introduction, but also in frequent footnote citations. More sparingly, the body-text fruitfully contrasts Sasser’s reading with influential views, especially those of Don Garrett (1997), David Owen (1999), Peter Millican (2012), and Hsueh Qu (2020) (e.g., 17–18, 74–77, 81–82, 153–55, 169). The book makes a compelling case that Hume has a unified approach to epistemology across his various texts, while still showing sensitivity to their differences (cf. 20, 127–31, 147). And the chapters focusing on Hume’s sceptical arguments (Chs. 3–4, 7) helpfully diagram those arguments into numbered premises without loss of content or nuance. This alone makes Sasser’s book an excellent aid for students of Hume’s epistemology. But its resolute defence of a purely practical reading of Hume’s response to scepticism makes the book an important read for students and scholars alike.

My main criticisms of the book concern omissions. First, the book is too brief about the practical benefits of sceptical philosophy and the mechanisms through which it is to achieve them.

Sasser claims – correctly, to my mind – that ‘Hume wants to arrive at the conclusion of epistemic skepticism because it motivates us to adopt a moderate attitude toward philosophy’ (177). But details about why it has that effect, and the ways in which that effect might be personally or socially beneficial, are relatively few, appearing mostly in the book’s final nine pages. A start can be found in Sasser’s claim that Hume’s youthful burnout of 1729 supplied him with experiential evidence that philosophy is best done in moderation (170–72). But some discussion of his *Essays*, account of the passions, concern with superstition and enthusiasm, or criticism of Stoicism, along with an expanded discussion of his irreligious aims (172–77), could have helped the book conclude more impactfully. Likewise, discussion of literature on these topics (e.g., M.A. Stewart 1991, James Harris 2015, Margaret Watkins 2019, and my own work 2021), including further engagement with Paul Russell (2010), could have shed more light on why, how, and to what extent Hume thought philosophy could moderate our passions, including the “passion for philosophy” (177).

Second, the purely practical reading raises several important philosophical problems which remain unaddressed. I will discuss two.

The first philosophical problem has to do with the role Sasser assigns to defeasible justification in Hume’s scepticism and his response to it. On Sasser’s view, our core beliefs enjoy an initial endorsement from philosophy in virtue of their arising from ‘principles’ of the imagination which are, in Hume’s words, ‘permanent, irresistible, and universal’ (61–68; T 1.4.4.1, SBN 225–26). Sasser understands this endorsement as an attribution of ‘defeasible justification,’ a provisional kind of justification which stands unless defeated by some further considerations (16, 64–65; cf. 141–44). According to Sasser, Hume’s sceptical arguments ‘defeat’ or ‘overturn’ this defeasible justification (16–17, 77–78, 85–87, 94, 100, 151). So philosophy ultimately deprives core beliefs of the positive epistemic status it initially gives to them. However, the initial, defeasible justification can be restored when the defeater considerations are neglected. That is what Sasser thinks Hume’s ‘Title Principle’ allows. When it tells us to ‘assent’ only ‘where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity’ (T 1.4.7.11, SBN 270), it does not endow our conclusions with fresh justification. Rather, it merely prevents our engaging in the sceptical reasoning which would defeat their preexisting justification (100–101).

The notion of defeasible justification thus accomplishes much interpretive work. But I worry that the notion is being misused. It seems to me that it has proper application only when defeaters contingently apply to the justification of individual propositions, rather than necessarily to a whole class of propositions. It makes sense to say, for example, that my justification for believing that my neighbor is home when I see her car parked outside is defeated by her roommate’s saying that she took the train to work today. Sceptical arguments, in contrast, attempt to show that we *must* lack justification for a whole class of propositions. It then seems wrong to say that Hume’s sceptical arguments about reason, for example, ‘defeat’ whatever defeasible justification our causal beliefs enjoy. Better say that we never had even defeasible justification in the first place (as Jim Pryor 2000 has urged).

This is not merely a terminological point. Saying that we are defeasibly justified but that this justification is always and non-accidentally defeated – if not simply a contradiction in terms – at least obscures the tension inherent in this attitude. This tension is one that Sasser’s Hume cannot avoid. It is unclear how, on his view, philosophy could give any positive epistemic status to beliefs

which it also shows must lack that status. Any positive status seems either mere lip-service – or else to have been withdrawn after the presentation of sceptical arguments. If Sasser’s reconciliation of Hume’s naturalism with his scepticism relies on Hume’s thinking that certain ‘irresistible’ beliefs are defeasibly justified (naturalism) though categorically defeated (scepticism), then it seems the tension has not really been resolved.

A second philosophical problem concerns conflict between the aims and norms of philosophy. Hume portrays his ‘abstruse’ philosophy as aiming ‘to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true...might at least be satisfactory to the human mind’ (T 1.4.7.14, SBN 272–73; EHU 1.2, SBN 6). But if that is so, sceptical arguments seem to thwart this aim. After all, Hume’s scepticism defeats all our core beliefs and Hume himself can find no opinion satisfactory during his intense doubt in the ‘Conclusion.’ Sasser is right to point out that Hume generally portrays sceptical arguments as following the norms of philosophy (85, 169). For instance, Hume finds ‘no error’ in his sceptical argument against reason, which he portrays as an application of ‘all the rules of logic’ (T 1.4.1.6–7, SBN 183–84). But then the norms of philosophy actively prevent it from reaching its own aim. Such internal conflict is puzzling.

Perhaps Sasser thinks Hume aims to expose this conflict and use it to ‘put philosophy in its proper place’ (21). For Sasser, Hume gives practical reasons to moderate the pursuit of philosophy. But insofar as this moderation leads Hume out of his intense scepticism and back into his researches, it seems to help philosophy achieve its aim to ‘establish a system or set of opinions.’ Do we not then also have a properly philosophical or epistemological reason to moderate philosophy, or reconceive its norms?

Though these problems put pressure on Sasser’s purely practical reading, they may ultimately reflect tensions which are more Hume’s than Sasser’s. Whether or not the tensions can be resolved, Sasser has shown that the purely practical reading is an important, plausible contender. But even those not inclined to this reading should find something of value in his book. His discussion of Hume’s scepticism with regard to the senses (Ch. 4), for instance, makes good sense of a notoriously difficult section of the *Treatise*. For Sasser, the core of the scepticism advanced there is Hume’s argument against the so-called ‘vulgar system’ (94–95; T 1.4.2.45), rather than his attributing the idea of body to the imagination. Sasser also helpfully points out that some of Hume’s ‘skeptical arguments...presuppose commitments that conflict with Hume’s own positions.’ Sasser calls these ‘*reductio* arguments.’ While the label may mislead, he has good grounds for viewing Hume as using arguments of this sort ‘to motivate...readers’ with commitments other than his ‘to accept the philosophical force of skepticism’ (17). Acknowledging this possibility sheds light on the *Enquiry*’s concluding catalogue of sceptical arguments (149–65). Hume may follow the Pyrrhonians in employing some arguments he does not endorse in order to create a degree of doubt which he does. And while such arguments are well contextualised by Sasser’s purely practical reading – on which they help Hume achieve his aim of moderating philosophy – their existence is consistent with and may aid other readings. *Hume and the Demands of Philosophy* offers useful interpretive resources and a reading worthy of consideration to any reader of Hume.

Charles Goldhaber, Haverford College