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HUME, WITTGENSTEIN, AND THE IMPACT OF SKEPTICISM

Miriam McCormick

Is it possible to be both a skeptic and engaged in constructive philosophy? In this paper “constructive philosophy” means philosophical theorizing that aims to offer a positive contribution to the advancement of knowledge, or a philosophical approach that is not *purely* critical. Answers depend on what it means to be a skeptic. Some forms of skepticism entail at least one of the following three views: there is no knowledge; no belief is more justified than another, and one should suspend all judgment. Skepticism entailing any of these three seems incompatible with constructive philosophy.

There are some forms of skepticism, however, that are not incompatible with constructive philosophy. Both David Hume and Ludwig Wittgenstein share a view of our epistemic practices that is skeptical. Further, the skeptical outlook they share is compatible with and informs their views on the nature and purpose of philosophical inquiry. Hume and the later Wittgenstein have similar meta-philosophies that follow from the similar form of skepticism they adopt. This paper begins by identifying the nature of Hume’s skepticism and then will show how it influences his positive philosophy. Once this is understood, we can see that skepticism plays a comparable role in Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

1. HUME’S SKEPTICISM

(i) The nature of Hume’s skepticism

There is much disagreement concerning the nature and significance of Hume’s skepticism. Some have argued that he is an anti-skeptical naturalist philosopher. This view, we shall see, fails to take his skepticism seriously enough.

Norman Kemp Smith was the first to emphasize the importance of naturalism in Hume’s philosophy,¹ arguing that Hume is not a skeptic,

but a naturalist seeking to explain how beliefs arise naturally without rational foundation. According to Kemp Smith, “the establishment of a purely naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instinct is a determining factor in Hume’s philosophy.”² The reasoning of the skeptic is entirely ineffective in face of human feelings and can thus be ignored. Given that there are certain things we *must* believe, the naturalist points out that skeptical arguments showing they lack justification are completely idle.

Some have emphasized Hume’s naturalism in order to counteract the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view that his skepticism was negative, destructive, undermined constructive philosophy, and committed Hume to the view that no belief is more reasonable than any other, so that it is foolish to reason about or believe in anything.³ Those who argue against this interpretation emphasize Hume’s positive contributions, especially his view that humans should be understood as sentimental, rather than rational, creatures. On this interpretation, Hume’s negative arguments are only there to show the ineffectiveness of rationalistic explanations and to prepare the way for alternative causal ones.⁴

Hume himself denies that he is a proponent of “total skepticism,” the view “that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in *any* thing possest of *any* measures of truth and falsehood.” Hume insists it is not possible to hold such a view, since “Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.” Those who claim all judgment must be suspended are members of a “fantastic sect.”⁵

But to subordinate Hume’s skepticism to his positive naturalistic program is to undervalue his skepticism. If we view Hume *simply* as a naturalist with no deep concern for skepticism topics—except, as P. F. Strawson says, “in so far as they supply a harmless amusement, a mild diversion to the intellect”⁶—we miss much of what motivates his project. If Hume really thought skepticism could be shrugged off, why limit philosophy to the “reflections of common life, methodized and corrected”?⁷ If he were not affected and chastened by skepticism, he could let his natural sentiments take him into the deepest metaphysics, but he tells us that if one remembers the force of skeptical doubts, one “will never be tempted to go beyond common life” (*ECHU* 162). Although skeptical reasoning cannot eliminate belief, it produces a shift in attitude that affects beliefs, and, in particular, beliefs about the nature of philosophical inquiry.

Hume is not an “arch” or destructive skeptic, but his skepticism *does* inform his positive philosophy, and those emphasizing his naturalism

underplay the impact of his skepticism. For example, in the *Abstract* to the *Treatise*, Hume says, “The philosophy contain’d in this book is very skeptical,” and in the *Treatise* itself he writes that “if we are philosophers it ought only to be upon skeptical principles” and that “in all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our skepticism” (*T* 270). In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the only philosophy Hume praises, that he does not think caters to our arrogance or superstitions, is “the Academic or Skeptical Philosophy” (*ECHU* 41). It is true that one cannot fully appreciate Hume’s philosophical approach without a proper understanding of the influence of Newtonian natural philosophy, but how his science of man unfolds cannot be fully understood without appreciating the depth of his skepticism.⁸

When we reflect on the arguments Hume reviews to show that some of our most basic beliefs are not founded on reason and that reason itself is untrustworthy, we can be led into an extreme skepticism. With his forceful arguments, the skeptic “seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction” (*ECHU* 159). This is the feeling Hume describes in *Treatise* 1.4.7, the concluding section of Book I of the *Treatise*, after reflecting on the fallible nature of his faculties, the crucial role of the imagination in forming important beliefs, the contradictory nature of our beliefs, and the impossibility of any refined reflection saving us from these difficulties. He almost embraces a skepticism endorsed by the most “fantastic skeptics.”

But Hume reports that “most fortunately it happens” that nature cures him of this “philosophical melancholy and delirium by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of [his] senses” (*T* 269). When Hume becomes engaged in life, the doubts that lead him to such a deplorable state cannot be sustained. When he is engaged in “the common affairs of life” his philosophical speculations “appear so cold, and strained and ridiculous” that they have no influence on him at all. In the *Enquiry*, Hume says that radical skepticism is subverted by “the occupations of common life;” the skeptical principles are overrun by the “more powerful principles of our nature” and so tend to have little effect on how we actually conduct our lives.

If, in the course of enjoying everyday life, a man who has been pushed into a state of anxiety or despair by deep reflection thinks about the deplorable state to which he has come by studying philosophy, he is likely to ask why he should engage in such an activity. What end can such reflection serve? If you can never be sure of the truth of your conclusions, and if you are struck by the force of skeptical arguments, what justifies further inquiry? It seems to lead only to pain and solitude.

Hume begins to despair of making progress, given the conclusions he has come to in Book I of the *Treatise*. His continuing his investigation is like putting out to sea in a “leaky weather-beaten vessel” that has “narrowly escaped ship-wreck.” But Hume says the “true skeptic” will not shun reflection by concluding that nothing good or useful can come of it, because that itself would be an extreme and destructive conclusion. If one is to preserve one’s skepticism “in all the incidents of life,” one must preserve it in this problem too. “A true skeptic will be diffident in his philosophical doubts, as well as his philosophical conviction” (*T* 273). One who continues to study philosophy when the inclination arises is more “truly skeptical” than one who is “so over-whelm’[d] with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it.” One who rejects all study of philosophy is clearly not being diffident in his philosophical doubts but is certain of the uselessness of philosophy.

(ii) Hume’s constructive philosophy

Hume is often portrayed as being opposed to metaphysics, and recommending it be cast into the flames along with all superstition. But, for Hume, not *all* metaphysics should be thrown away. In the first section of the first *Enquiry*, Hume says he suspects that “profound reasonings” are rejected without careful consideration and so proceeds “to consider what can reasonably be pleaded on their behalf” (*ECHU* 9). Despite the potential value of abstract philosophy, it can also be a “source of uncertainty and error” when one tries to “penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding” or when one’s motive to philosophize is to defend popular superstition. But instead of giving up on philosophy when faced with this mixture of metaphysical jargon and popular superstition, Hume recommends that we “cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate” (*ECHU* 12).

At the end of *Treatise* 1.4.7. Hume characterizes the value of his philosophical inquiry. Hume has a curiosity to “be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me” (*T* 271), and the rest of the *Treatise* investigates these ideas. A “true skeptic”, like Hume, should not avoid such an investigation, but not merely to satisfy a desire for intellectual pleasure.⁹ He sees that the learned world is in “deplorable ignorance” concerning the nature of our moral, aesthetic, and intellectual judgments and he thinks that his investigation into the passions and inclinations that govern humans can contribute to the “instruction of mankind.” He hopes to replace the tenuous, though “specious and agreeable” views

that philosophers embrace, with “a system or set of opinions, which . . . might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination.” He knows such a system will be limited in what it can accomplish, but he can still hope to increase our understanding of human experience by offering more careful explanations than have previously been given.

We can see, then, that Hume’s more general philosophical aims do not conflict with the skeptical conclusions of Book I of the *Treatise*. These conclusions tell us that our most basic beliefs are grounded in principles that lack rational foundation, and that abstract reasoning can lead us to the brink of total skepticism. These skeptical conclusions would be inconsistent with Hume’s project if his aims included searching for final answers that would put an end to inquiry about specific matters. But his more modest aim remains consistent with his skepticism. He only wishes to show the defects of other systems and offer alternatives that are not open to the same criticisms.

The modesty of Hume’s aims extends further to the subject matter of his inquiries. One aim is to delineate “more distinctly those subjects, where alone [philosophers] can expect assurance and conviction,” and to bring the study of human nature “a little more into fashion” (*T* 273). As a *consequence* of recognizing our limitations, we limit our inquiries to phenomena of the human world. In the *Enquiry*, Hume says that one “natural result” of skeptical doubts that can be of “benefit to mankind” is the limitation of the subject matter of philosophical inquiry (*ECHU* 162). Such statements make it clear that the kind of philosophy Hume sees as valuable is influenced by his skepticism; it is not *simply* an adoption of philosophical naturalism.

This skeptical modesty is not simply a kind of fallibilism, that is, recognition that one can never be absolutely certain of the truth of one’s conclusions. Hume is clear that accepting skeptical principles will limit inquiry. Thus, a skeptic’s philosophical *aims*, not simply his attitude towards the results, will differ from those of a non-skeptic. A skeptic can still engage in constructive philosophy but he will proceed with care and caution, and will not work out a system based on principles he has found agreeable and then assume that the world *must* correspond to them. The skeptic will not decide in advance what a proper answer must look like. His curiosity will lead him to search for illumination and he will be successful whenever he comes to understand something that he did not before.

2. WITTGENSTEIN'S SKEPTICISM

(i) Is Wittgenstein a skeptic?

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein contrasts his philosophical approach with more traditional ones.¹⁰ Unless philosophy understands its limitations, he argues, it is doomed to failure. Like Hume, Wittgenstein thought that a particular conception of philosophy—one that aims for complete and final truth—leads to insoluble problems. Both offered a different conception—one that puts into practice the skeptical virtues of modesty and caution.

We shall see that Wittgenstein and Hume agree that philosophy is only likely to be illuminating if its aims and methods are limited and cautious. But one may object to the idea that there is an important connection between taking such a limited, modest approach and the acceptance of any skeptical conclusions. Does Wittgenstein even accept any such conclusions as Hume does? Wittgenstein does accept certain skeptical conclusions, if we look at what he has to say in *On Certainty* about the confidence we have in our ultimate presuppositions.¹¹ Like Hume, Wittgenstein thinks the way to approach the total skeptic, the skeptic who doubts *all* claims to knowledge, is to suggest that his project is impossible and his questioning meaningless.

The following remark provides us with an idea of the kind of response Wittgenstein proposes:

One might simply say “O, rubbish!” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish him. (OC 495)

What must be explained is why such objections are rubbish. To show that total skeptical doubt is incoherent, Wittgenstein argues that this doubt is “logically impossible.” He says:

There are cases where doubt is unreasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible. And there seems to be no clear boundary between them (OC 454).

What does it mean for a doubt to be logically impossible? Wittgenstein equates “logically impossible” with “meaningless.” Trying to doubt everything all at once, he argues, violates the “logic” of our language. Just as saying that one *knows* something entails the possibility that one can doubt what one claims to know, saying one *doubts* something entails the possibility that the doubt can be appeased, and one can come to know what one now doubts. The total skeptic, however, has nothing left to count as evidence for appeasing that doubt. Wittgenstein questions the coherence of the skeptical hypothesis “that all the things around us

don't exist" (OC 55). For when one hypothesizes about something not existing, one can contrast it with something that does. If someone says, "Perhaps this planet doesn't exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way" (OC 56), this hypothesis only makes sense if we accept that some things exist. If we try to doubt everything then "doubt gradually loses its sense" (OC 56). The logic of the language game of doubting is such that not everything can be questioned.¹² In the first *Enquiry*, Hume says that universal doubt is impossible, but he does not say why (ECHU 150). Wittgenstein provides a reason for this impossibility: it is impossible because it cannot be articulated.

Most of the time when I assert something, or even say that I *know* that something is the case, I recognize the possibility that I could be in error. That is, I can imagine discovering something that would cause me to revise my view. And when I come to find out that I was mistaken about a particular fact, I do not lose all faith in judging. This is the case with most empirical statements we make. We may assert them with a high degree of assurance, but discovering that we are mistaken about them does not shatter our view of the world. But there are some things about which we cannot imagine being mistaken. If we were told we were mistaken about such things, we would question whether we understand the meaning of our words. We can see this more vividly if we imagine being mistaken about things where mistakes are usually ruled out. For example, what do we say about Wittgenstein if he says he is a woman? Unlike being wrong about an historical fact, this error cannot be explained by his saying that he failed to "check the statement" (OC 79). Rather, we would begin to wonder whether he understood the meaning of his own statement (OC 81), or whether we were using our words in the same way. Communication would break down if such "mistakes" began to pile up.

Why then, can I not be mistaken about "here is one hand" as I hold up my hand and look at it? One may think it is because we have a privileged epistemic status in relation to this proposition; we *know* it with complete certainty. Wittgenstein disagrees. It is not because we have knowledge that such claims cannot be mistaken; it is the *logical* role they play which accounts for their infallibility. Wittgenstein provides many analogies and descriptions to help explain what is special about those things that traditional antiskeptical philosophers claim to know beyond any doubt. He says they belong to "our frame of reference" (OC 83), are part of "the inherited background" (OC 94), are "absolutely solid" (OC 112, OC 151), "stand unshakeably fast" (OC 144), are "like the axis around which a body rotates" (OC 152), belong "to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts" (OC 211), "like hinges" upon which our questions, doubts and disputes turn (OC 342, 655), and are like "yardsticks" (OC

492). His most common way of describing them is as foundational, or “fundamental” (OC 514, 670). The infallibility of “here is one hand” is “a foundation for all my action” (OC 414); these facts are “fused into the foundations of our language-game” (OC 558).

So, for Wittgenstein, what saves us from total skepticism is that our language and practice prevent such positions being formulated coherently. As soon as the skeptic begins to argue, to raise questions and criticisms, he leaves some truths unquestioned. Similarly, beliefs and claims to knowledge are justified within a language game, or system. The total skeptic cannot take the fact that the foundations of this system are groundless as proof that all our beliefs and claims to knowledge are groundless.

But what about the system itself? What about my ultimate assumptions? I *feel* that my ultimate presuppositions not only justify higher-order beliefs, but are also the right ones to have. Are my feelings justified; am I right to feel the way I do? It seems that epistemic responsibility can be attributed to any belief one has. That is, if asked, I should be able to justify any belief I may have. If I cannot, I can be *blamed* for having an unfounded belief. And if I do have a justification, I show that I am *right* to believe what I do. Given that we ascribe epistemic responsibility to agents, we ought to be able to say more than that their environment *causes* them to believe what they do. Such an explanation may show why I should not be blamed for my beliefs, but it will not show that I am right to think or believe as I do.

Now Wittgenstein would agree that we can be held responsible for our ordinary empirical beliefs, and the last step in the process of justifying those beliefs is something that is “in the space of reasons,” and that can be articulated. But if one is asked to justify one of our ultimate principles, one can only point to how important it is that it remains unquestioned, that our understanding what our words mean depends on its being accepted. Perhaps then we have pragmatic *reasons* for trusting in these principles. Wittgenstein says:

So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism.

Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung* (OC 422).

Why does Wittgenstein not say that what he is saying *is* pragmatism? He seems to think pragmatism is committed to the idea that we have chosen our system because experience has shown us that it works best, and this is a commitment he wants to avoid. There is no question of rational choice here, so to speak of pragmatic reasons is misleading. Its “outstanding success,” he says, is not a *ground* for our “game of judging” (OC 131). We do not come to accept, for example, the principle of induc-

tion, because we have discovered its outstanding success. That things turn out well with the principles we use, and that these help us to make sense of the world we experience, are *causes* of our having the system we do; they are not rational grounds. Even though these feelings are not grounded in reason, Wittgenstein does not say they are *unjustified*. He conceives of the certainty we feel about our unquestioned assumptions “as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified, as it were, as something animal” (*OC* 359).

For Hume, we are “finished with justification,” when we reach original principles of human nature—features of our nature that help to explain other judgments and behavior but are, themselves, inexplicable. We can give no reason, he says, for “our most general and refined principles, besides our experience of their reality” (*T* xviii). Wittgenstein’s description of what we find at “bedrock” is similar. He says what we find “is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting” (*OC* 110); something animal, “a form of life” (*OC* 358).

It may seem that there is a significant difference between Hume’s ultimate, inexplicable principles and what we find at Wittgenstein’s bedrock. Are not Hume’s principles *justified* by our experience of their reality while, for Wittgenstein, what remains ungrounded is beyond justification of any kind? But if we look a little more closely at where inquiry ends for Hume, this apparent difference evaporates. When we discover an inexplicable feature of human nature—such as the habit of mind that determines us to reason inferentially or the sympathetic mechanism that allows us to consider the feelings of other humans—what we find is something like an instinct; we ultimately find a description of what humans *do*.¹³ Of course, we *experience* that this is how we act, but Wittgenstein could say the same thing about what we reach at bedrock. We can experience that this is our form of life, but our form of life is not *justified* by experience. The system of interdependent commitments, some of which are ungrounded, is not something that we develop because, upon reflection, it best captures our experience. Wittgenstein says we cannot call it reasonable or unreasonable; “it is there — like our life” (*OC* 559).

(ii) Is Wittgenstein a constructive philosopher?

We have seen that Wittgenstein is a skeptic, and that his skepticism is similar to Hume’s. But we see clearly that Hume has certain constructive philosophical aims and ambitions – ones that are compatible with his skepticism. But is Wittgenstein developing a positive philosophy or does he only want to expose the futility of philosophical inquiry? Robert Fogelin has suggested that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy can be described as Neo-Pyrrhonian. He compares Wittgenstein to the

Pyrrhonists because he also opposes theory and philosophy. According to Fogelin, “Wittgenstein agrees on the central point of ancient skepticism: philosophy is not possible as a theoretical, discursive, or rational discipline.”¹⁴

This is an overstatement. The Pyrrhonian aim is to attain tranquility, and to reach this aim one must stop doing philosophy. Wittgenstein says that “the real discovery is one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to” (*PI* 133), which is not to say his discoveries support stopping doing philosophy altogether. Hume is still interested in engaging in philosophy, but his aims and approach are quite different from those of traditional philosophy. Wittgenstein, like Hume, was not trying to cure people of wanting to do philosophy, but of wanting to engage in a kind of philosophy that seeks answers of a certain kind. Nor is Wittgenstein opposed to theory. Rather, he warns against the temptation of seeking unrealizable philosophical goals. A theory can provide a view, or point to an aspect of the concept being investigated. But if a theory is taken to provide the complete picture, or to provide insight into the essence of a concept, it is likely to lead away from illumination.

Wittgenstein does not begin the *Investigations* with an introduction explaining his philosophical method. He begins by providing examples of his method at work until *PI* 89. He then stops to comment on what he has been doing. The book begins with Augustine’s picture of how we learn a language by learning which words signify objects. His idea is that I see various objects around me and then learn, by ostension, to name them. Even in this first remark, it is clear that Wittgenstein criticizes Augustine for attempting a complete picture, and to provide the essence of meaning. For some words Augustine’s picture works well enough, but Wittgenstein emphasizes the complexity of our language, focusing on cases where Augustine’s view is inadequate. For example, Augustine’s picture does not tell us how one comes to learn what “red” or “five” means. Augustine does describe “a system of communication,” but it pictures “a language more primitive than our own.”

Wittgenstein suggests a shift in attitude. He invites us to consider the proceedings we call “games” and asks what is common to them all. The traditional philosopher says, “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games.’” Wittgenstein asks us instead to “look and see whether there is anything common to all.” What one finds, Wittgenstein suggests, is “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in details” (*PI* 66). He likens these similarities to “family resemblance” (*PI* 67).

Throughout his discussion of language, meaning, and games, Wittgenstein shows how philosophical problems arise from the tendency to seek particular kinds of answers to questions about our concepts. When such answers cannot be attained, we feel that we do not know or understand our concepts. If we alter our aims in dealing with philosophical questions, however, many of our “philosophical problems” will disappear.

The traditional philosopher possesses an ideal of what answers to questions such as “what is time?” or “what is language?” should be, and answers that do not measure up to this ideal are deemed unsatisfactory. Wittgenstein shows how satisfying answers can be provided, and suggests they seem unsatisfactory because of the tendency to take ideal explanations or definitions as *real* ones. Describing this prevalent philosophical attitude, Wittgenstein says, in *PI* 101:

The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal “*must*” be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not as yet see how it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this “*must*.” We think it must be in reality for we think we already see it there.

But this is only one way of looking at philosophical questions and how to answer them. Yet it is an attitude that affects the way we view particular philosophical questions, and philosophy in general; “it is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (*PI* 103). Wittgenstein hopes to prod his readers to take off the glasses, and see things in a different way.

For the traditional philosopher, it is not enough to have important aspects of the investigated phenomena identified and shown how they are connected or fail to connect to others. He wants something complete, something deeper. But it is when one thinks understanding consists in more than “seeing connections” that understanding becomes elusive and the practice of philosophy itself becomes questionable. Wittgenstein hopes “to give philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which brings itself in question” (*PI* 133). But this can only be done if the aims of philosophy are limited, and the answers are modest. The following remark, *PI* 131, sums up the difference between two philosophical approaches:

For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison—as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy).

This remark echoes Hume’s criticism of “castle-building” philosophers who invent theories that are the result of hypotheses “embrac’d merely

for being specious and agreeable.” But if a theory or a “model” is seen as akin to a method of measurement or comparison then it *can* be useful. We can measure, for example, a particular case of an ascription of knowledge against a theory of knowledge and see how they compare. If many of these particular cases stand up to this measure, we can say that knowledge ascriptions are *like* this and perhaps viewing knowledge *like* this can help untangle a problem or ease a confusion. If very few cases measure up we may wonder how useful the theory is. But such an exercise will illuminate the phenomenon under consideration without falling into the dogmatism to which Wittgenstein alludes.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following can serve as an illustration of how his philosophical approach offers a critical view of certain kinds of theoretical aspirations while still providing insight into the phenomenon under investigation, namely rule-following. These remarks about rules (*PI* 143–242) are often taken to represent a very radical skepticism where, if Wittgenstein is right, it is impossible to know if I am ever *really* following the rule I take myself to be following.¹⁵

Wittgenstein’s discussion in *PI* 185–198 shows the futility of providing an interpretation of what it *means* to follow a rule that will silence the skeptic who demands that we point to some fact which proves that our behavior has been rule-guided. The failure to come up with an “interpretation” that captures the essence of rule following “shews that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases” (*PI* 201).

These interpretations do offer various ways of expressing what it means for a rule to be obeyed. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says, “We ought to restrict the term ‘interpretation’ to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another” (*PI* 201). To obey a rule is to have certain intentions *and* dispositions *and* introspectible feelings. Not every occurrence of obeying a rule must have all these features, just as not every game must involve competition. Just as we cannot construct a theory that captures the essence of “game” neither can we do so for “following a rule.” But by attending to the way assertions and attributions of rule following are made, we deepen our understanding. This is an example of what Wittgenstein calls a “perspicuous representation” of our grammar (*PI* 122). Offering a number of particular cases of the phenomenon being studied helps to provide “a clear view of the use our words” which can produce “just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions.’” Even if this understanding is different from that which is sought in the search for essences, it is understanding nonetheless. And if Wittgenstein’s reflections can produce such understanding, he is not *simply* a critical and destructive philosopher.

3. SKEPTICAL PHILOSOPHY

The idea that there is some important similarity between Hume and Wittgenstein has been pointed out from time to time in the last forty years, though there have been few detailed discussions of what it is they share.¹⁶ Strawson argues that they both respond to skepticism by showing it is completely idle and so can be justly ignored. But what must be emphasized is that, for both Hume and Wittgenstein, we are not in the same position after we confront skeptical arguments as we were before such confrontation. In our “natural” or “vulgar” state we may well think that there is a rational basis for our trust in, for example, inductive principles. Wittgenstein says, “The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing” (*OC* 166). Why would this be difficult if there were not some strong (and probably entirely natural) tendency to see our beliefs as having rational grounds? An acceptance of the limits of justification can have an impact on attitudes and beliefs; it is thus not idle. One of the domains it can affect is philosophical inquiry. We have seen that, for Hume, it leads him to view philosophy as being limited to careful, systematic investigation of common life. Wittgenstein argues for a similar kind of limiting in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

To see further what distinguishes Hume and Wittgenstein from non-skeptical philosophers, it is helpful to look at John McDowell’s discussion in *Mind and World*.¹⁷ McDowell emphasizes that what we seek when we are wondering about the relation of thought to the world is a kind of justification for the beliefs we have and the claims we make. If I am justified in holding a particular belief, I should be able to trace its grounds back to some fact about the world which can provide a justification for it. McDowell argues that any view which describes the last step in this grounding process as a kind of unconceptualized experience, what McDowell calls an appeal to “the Myth of the Given,” fails to provide the justification we seek in explaining why our thoughts are somehow connected to a world beyond thought.¹⁸ He says that we are driven to this view because the alternative seems to be no grounding at all. But, however tempting appeals to the Given might be, they will not help explain how the world can *rationally* constrain our thoughts. The best these appeals can do is to explain how the world constrains our thoughts in the sense that we are caused to, or cannot help but have, certain thoughts given the world we inhabit. That is, appeals to the Given can provide us with what McDowell terms an *exculpation*. He says, “It is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification. In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications.”¹⁹

Both Hume and Wittgenstein accept that we cannot, in the end, get beyond exculpations. It is this acceptance that makes them skeptics and, for both, the acceptance that we lack ultimate justification for our practices of common life entails abandoning a particular conception of philosophy that seeks to construct theories that will provide such a justification. They thus argue that illumination is only possible if we limit the aims and scope of philosophical investigations. What Hume and Wittgenstein share is the view that we are likely to learn more about ourselves and ease our confusions if we pay close attention to what we actually do. Though operating within different frameworks, Hume and Wittgenstein, make similar points about the nature of philosophy: illumination is more likely if we aim at clarification rather than either justification or discovery of the truth.

According to the skeptical philosopher, a philosophical theory is simply a careful characterization of the phenomenon under investigation – one that seeks to clarify confusions or ease apparent tensions in our thought. Careful thought, analysis, and observation can show us different aspects of the important concepts we use, or propositions in which we believe. Through such investigations, we may find tensions in our thinking of which we were not aware or commitments that we would like to question. Philosophical theories of this kind are consistent with Humean skepticism. They differ from scientific theories in their aims for, at least traditionally, scientific theories aim at truth and completeness. The skeptical philosopher has a more limited and more modest goal than many contemporary philosophers, including those of a naturalistic bent. He recognizes that no theory he constructs will tell us the true nature of “knowledge,” “time” or “obligation,” thus ending inquiry on the matter.

The aim of this paper has been to show that it is possible to be a skeptic engaged in constructive philosophy, and that Hume and Wittgenstein are examples of such skeptics. It has not been argued that skeptical philosophy is *better* than non-skeptical philosophy. But we have seen that both Hume and Wittgenstein argue that it is more valuable because they think that when philosophers seek the complete truth about the nature of, for example, “knowledge” or “freedom,” they do very little to further understanding. One might object that even the traditional philosopher recognizes human fallibility and so would admit that he may very well never attain his goal of offering such a complete answer. One can still aim toward it and, in so doing, get closer. What Hume and Wittgenstein suggest is that even such ambitious *aims* inhibit illumination. For in aiming to construct a theory that provides a complete account of the nature of a difficult concept, one moves further and further away from providing *any* understanding at all. To assess

the validity of this claim, we would need to compare those philosophers who aim to construct comprehensive theories that tell us what is the true nature of the phenomenon under investigation with those philosophers who are much more modest in their aims, and determine which approach is most fruitful. This is not a task that can be undertaken here, but, in closing, we can briefly discuss how the two approaches differ in respect to the debate among contemporary epistemologists regarding what distinguishes knowledge from other epistemic states.

One philosopher whose approach to epistemological questions is compatible with skepticism is Robert Nozick. He begins his *Philosophical Explanations* with a description of his metaphilosophy. There he notes that philosophy often has a coercive character. Philosophers produce arguments, which they hope will prove their views and force others to believe in them. If the aim of philosophy is taken to be proof, it makes sense that philosophers tend to begin with necessary first principles, upon which their proofs are built. But such a “philosophical tower” topples if the bottom brick crumbles or is removed, and then even those insights, which could be developed independently of the first principles, are lost. Nozick suggests that the model for a philosophical system could be the Parthenon, instead of a tottering tower. One can begin with separate philosophical insights and then let linkages emerge, uniting columns instead of piling brick upon brick. If this approach is followed then even if one part of the philosophical structure crumbles, parts will remain standing. But what would the aim of building such a structure be? What can philosophy aim for if not arguments and proofs that convince others of the way things are? A philosophical theory, says Nozick, can be used to explain how something *p* can be possible, given that other things which apparently exclude *p* seem to be true. Many philosophical problems have this form. For example, one problem in epistemology can be described in the following way: “How is it possible that we know anything given the facts the skeptic enumerates, for example, that it is logically possible we are dreaming or floating in a tank with our brain being stimulated to give us exactly our current experiences and even all our past ones?”²⁰ A philosopher can look at our practice of claiming and attributing knowledge and show how this is possible, thus easing the apparent tension.

We can see how this approach is quite Wittgensteinian in spirit. By offering perspicuous representations of the way we use our words, we can solve puzzles, and untangle confusions. Is this to admit that there are no genuine philosophical problems, but rather only puzzles? Rather—and I think Wittgenstein would agree—philosophical problems *are* puzzles and very difficult ones at that; they take a lot of reflection to untangle. This is not to debase philosophy, for these reflections take us deep and far in our search for understanding.

Most contemporary epistemology is not, however, of the Nozikian brand. Most aim to provide comprehensive characterizations of knowledge. Each theory seeks a correct way of distinguishing accidentally true beliefs from knowledge (even though they may admit to the possibility that they have not achieved final success). The following are some such characterizations:

“S knows that p,” means, “S is able to offer compelling evidence for p”;

“S knows that p,” means, “S has come to believe p though some reliable process”;

“S knows that p,” means, “S has eliminated all the (relevant) possibilities of not-p”;

“S knows that p,” means, “S is justified in believing that p;”

Now it seems that “S knows that p” often entails each of the above. It is not clear if any of these features of knowledge are either necessary or sufficient, though they are all important. Competing epistemologists decide that some are essential and others not, and it is questionable whether there is sufficient motivation for their decisions. A theory is constructed. It is then discovered that this theory yields a counterintuitive result. The theorist then has two options: Revise the theory so as to avoid the result, or accept the result. Revision can lead to accusations of ad hoc-ery, and so the tendency is to accept the result. This seems to be an acceptable approach if there is some independent reason for thinking the theory is true. Yet if any reason is given why these counterintuitive results should be accepted, it is usually that the proposed theory is better at staving off objections than its competitors.

But the various epistemological theories need not be competitors. Perhaps each offers insight into an aspect of knowledge or justification. If a theory does nothing to further our understanding of knowledge and justification, then it should be discarded. But most will have something to offer. As the true skeptic does not seek final or complete answers, he is more flexible in determining what is of value in each theory. It is often thought that the way to increase our understanding is to aim for the highest possible standard. But in so doing, we may hinder ourselves in the search for greater illumination. When we set more modest goals for our theories, considerable, albeit incomplete, understanding results.²¹

NOTES

1. Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind*, vol. 14 (1905), pp. 149–173. For those who have followed his lead, see Nicholas Capaldi, *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* (Boston: G. H. Hall & Co., 1975); P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Annette Baier, *The Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); and especially Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

2. Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume," p. 150.

3. In essay 2, chapter 12 of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man.*, Thomas Reid claims that Hume's system is one of "absolute skepticism." Hume continues to be presented as the great skeptic in many nineteenth-century books on the history of philosophy and this view has persisted into the present day.

4. Stroud says, for example, that an essential part of Hume's positive program "is the deflation of the pretensions of reason. That clears the stage so that feeling and sentiment can more easily be seen to play their true role" (Stroud, *Hume*, p. 15).

5. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 183. Hereafter referred to as "T."

6. P. F. Strawson, p. 13.

7. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 162. Hereafter referred to as "ECHU."

8. Many Hume scholars are now concerned with how the naturalist and skeptical elements of his philosophy fit together, rather than declaring either side dominant. See, for example, David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); David Owen, *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). In *Hume's Scepticism and the Science of Human Nature* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002) Paul Stanistreet views the relationship between Hume's skepticism and his theory of human nature as "the central interpretive issue of Hume scholarship" (p. viii) and he argues, as I do, that Hume's skepticism helps form the limits of his philosophical inquiry.

9. Baier and Garrett both claim that Hume's return to philosophy is ultimately grounded in sentiment. In the final pages of his book, Stanistreet seems to concur with this view.

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963.) Hereafter referred to as “*PI*.”

11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969). Hereafter referred to as “*OC*.”

12. See *OC*, pp. 115, 450, 519, and 625 for further discussion of why Wittgenstein thinks a doubt is only meaningful if it is limited.

13. For a discussion of where philosophical inquiry ends for Hume and its relation to Wittgenstein, see Peter Jones, “Strains in Hume and Wittgenstein,” in *Hume A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), p. 193. For a different view, which sees the two as having very different conceptions of where inquiry ends, see Jerry Gill, “On Reaching Bedrock,” *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 277–290. I discuss the role and nature of Hume’s original principles in “Hume on Natural Belief and Original Principles,” *Hume Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1993), pp. 103–116.

14. Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 226.

15. See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 9.

16. See Martin Bell and Marie McGinn, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” *Philosophy*, vol. 65, no. 254 (1990), pp. 399–418; and David Pears, “Wittgenstein’s Naturalism,” *The Monist*, vol. 78, no. 4 (1995), pp. 411–424.

17. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). McDowell’s main concern is to explain how the world provides a rational constraint for thought without compromising thought’s limitless freedom. But in the course of laying out this problem and its possible solution, he helps to make clear what I think distinguishes a skeptical philosopher from others.

18. McDowell borrows the expression “the Myth of the Given” from Wilfred Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 253–329.

19. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 8.

20. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 8.

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