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Miriam McCormick

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Why Should We Be Wise?

MIRIAM McCORMICK

There is a tension in Hume's theory of belief. He tells us that beliefs are ideas that, as a result of certain natural mechanisms of the mind, become particularly lively and vivacious. Such an account seems to allow us little control over which beliefs we acquire, maintain or eschew. It seems I could not avoid feeling the strength of such ideas any more than I could avoid feeling the strength of the sun when exposed to it. Yet much of Hume's writings on belief reveal that he thinks we do have quite a lot of control in the area of belief maintenance and that we can be blameworthy for holding some beliefs and not others. For example, he says that beliefs that are a result of prejudice, namely beliefs formed on the basis of "general rules contrary to present observation and experience," are "errors."¹ It is similarly an error if I believe x rather than y simply because x occurred more recently and is thus conceived by my mind in a more lively manner. The man who trembles when looking at the precipice below him, despite the complete security afforded by the iron cage he is in, ought not to believe he is in danger. Hume says we "ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effect" with rules that are formed in the understanding. These rules teach us to "distinguish accidental circumstances from the effacious causes" (T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149). In the first *Enquiry*, Hume says, "A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence."²

There have been a number of attempts to explain how such claims are consistent with Hume's theory of belief. While I think these accounts have succeeded in explaining how Hume has the resources to show how certain people—namely the wise—can regulate and evaluate their beliefs, the question that remains is whether Hume's endorsement of the wise over the vulgar can be justified. This

latter question tends to be addressed only suggestively by those whose main concern is to solve the problem of how Hume's account of belief allows for some degree of control. I will begin by discussing why the problem of control arises for Hume and survey some of the solutions to this problem. I will then turn to the central question of this paper—namely, on what basis can Hume claim that we ought to regulate our beliefs according to the rules of good reasoning; what makes one idea enlivening mechanism *better* than another? I will argue that Hume's approval is politically motivated; he thinks we would organize ourselves in a more fair and just manner if more people regulated their beliefs according to the rules of good reasoning. On this view, there is a strong utilitarian strand to his preference for the ways of the wise. We will all be better off if more people choose this path, even if, in individual cases, following reason can lead to melancholy and despair. My main purpose is to understand the nature of Hume's answer to the question as to why we should be wise, not to investigate what can motivate one to adopt wise reasoning habits. But it is a virtue of my answer to the question concerning the source of approval for the wise that it provides some resources for explaining how we can become motivated to follow reason even when our immediate inclinations turn in another direction. I will end with a brief discussion of this question of motivation.

1. Hume's Account of Belief

In *Treatise* 1.3.7, Hume discusses the nature of belief. If we believe something then the idea of what we believe is an essential part of the belief but, says Hume, it is "not the whole" (T 1.3.7.1; SBN 94). For there are many ideas of which we can conceive yet do not believe. What we must discover are the particular qualities of those ideas to which we assent.

Many of our beliefs are the conclusions of causal reasoning, and these conclusions, Hume says, always concern "the existence of objects or of their qualities." Is it *existence*, asks Hume, that is peculiar to those ideas to which we assent? This cannot be what differentiates belief from mere conception for, according to Hume, there is no difference between conceiving of something and conceiving of it as *existent*. He says "that when after the simple conception of anything we would conceive it as existent, we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea" (T.1.3.7.2; SBN 94). The same is true, he says, when we *believe* in the existence of an object. Belief does not add to or alter the *idea* as it was first conceived. There is a big difference, however, between simple conception and belief, and given that the difference "lies not in the parts or composition of the idea" it must "lie in the *manner* in which we conceive it" (T 1.3.7.2; SBN 95). How then does the manner in which we conceive an idea that is believed differ from the manner in which we conceive an idea to which we do not assent?

It is easy, says Hume, to answer this question concerning propositions that are proved by intuition or demonstration. In these cases, Hume says, the person assenting to such propositions “not only conceives the ideas according to the proposition, but is necessarily determin’d to conceive them in that particular manner” (T 1.3.7.3; SBN 95). I must assent to the propositions “two plus two equals four.” I cannot imagine a world where this proposition is false. But concerning matters of fact, that is, conclusions from causal reasoning, I can imagine that both what I believe and what I do not believe are true. There is no absolute necessity concerning my manner of conceiving *these* propositions. Though I do not believe it, I can understand the meaning of “Caesar died in his bed.” I can imagine a world in which *this* proposition is true. Concerning such propositions, Hume asks, “Wherein consists the difference betwixt incredulity and belief?”

Hume has already established and reiterates that the difference between incredulity and belief lies in the *manner* of conception of an idea. The idea itself is not changed into another idea when one comes to believe it. How then can one alter an idea without changing it into another idea? According to Hume, there is only one way to vary an idea without it being turned into another idea. This is by increasing or diminishing its force and vivacity. Hume likens ideas to colours. A particular shade can acquire more force or liveliness without becoming another shade. Once any other variation is introduced, another shade is produced. Given that belief only changes the manner in which we conceive an idea and does not change the idea itself, it can only “bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity.” Hume thus defines belief as “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression” (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96).

Hume provides this definition without having explained why an idea must be associated with or related to a present impression to become a belief. He goes on to explain why this must be the case in 1.3.8. Impressions differ from ideas in that they are more forceful. When any impression becomes present to us, our minds are transported to the ideas related to it and, he says, the impression communicates to these related ideas “a share of its force and vivacity” (T 1.3.8.2; SBN 99). When the mind is enlivened by a present impression, the idea related to this impression becomes more lively. This increased liveliness occurs because of “a natural transition of the disposition from one to the other” (T 1.3.8.2; SBN 99). For example, when I see a picture of a friend that really resembles him, my idea of him is enlivened by this present impression, that is, the picture. We associate the idea of our friend with our impression of our picture of him. The liveliness of the impression also makes this associated idea more lively.

Having established how an impression can enliven an idea associated with it, Hume returns to cases where an idea acquires sufficient force to become a belief. There are a number of ways this can occur, the most common being when the idea and impression have been constantly conjoined in past experience.³ When I

experience a type of impression that has constantly been conjoined with another, a habit is formed in my mind such that when I have an impression of one, its vivacity is transmitted to the associated idea. For example, if I see that it is raining, I will believe that the pavement is wet, even if I cannot see the pavement. The idea of the pavement being wet is associated with my impression of the rain by the relation of constant conjunction in the past. This idea is enlivened by the present impression to the point that it feels almost like an impression. My manner of conceiving “the pavement is wet” and “it is raining” are similar; the ideas strike me with equal strength. When an idea approaches the strength, or liveliness⁴ of an impression, it is called a belief. In the Appendix, Hume offers some more examples of how a present impression enlivens an idea so that its feeling in the mind is strong enough to be called a belief. For instance, I hear a friend’s voice in the next room. This present impression has always been conjoined with this person and so my *idea* of that person is so enlivened by the impression of this effect that it approaches the liveliness of that impression. And it is this manner of conceiving of that person in the next room that we call *believing* that the person is in the next room.

Hume’s initial discussion of belief focuses on the enlivening of ideas that attain the status of beliefs. But it is also possible for the vivacity of an idea to be diminished so that it no longer is conceived in the manner required for it to count as a belief. Hume provides examples of this kind of diminution in *Treatise* 1.3.13, “Of unphilosophical probability.” A present lively impression will carry a lot of force to the related idea but as time elapses and the impression in the memory becomes less lively, so too can the related ideas. Hume provides the example of a drunkard:

Thus, a drunkard, who has seen his companion die of debauch, is struck with that instance for some time and dreads a like accident for himself: But as the memory of it decays away by degrees, his former security returns, and the danger seems less certain and real. (T 1.3.13.2; SBN 144)

It seems that the drunkard can *believe* he is in danger of dying if he doesn’t alter his ways and such a belief may influence his actions, but over time he loses the conviction and although he can still conceive of the idea, it will no longer hold the status of a belief.

2. The Problem of Control

Hume’s account of belief seems to leave no room for the notion of responsibility in belief formation. When I am faced with certain impressions, I cannot help but to believe in certain related ideas; it seems I have no choice in what I believe. This inevitability seems to exempt me from blame; I cannot be criticized for having the

beliefs I do. Given Hume's mechanistic story about the enlivening (and diminution) of beliefs, the answer to why I believe x must be: I believe x because of an inexplicable habit of the mind to associate present impressions with their related ideas. Questions about whether I *ought* to believe x seem out of place.

A number of scholars have successfully argued that Hume is not committed to the view that we are utterly passive in our belief-formation. Even if an essential component of belief, for Hume, involves a non-rational feeling, one can make choices regarding the data one attends to, and the processing of it one does, before this belief-feeling occurs. By emphasizing Hume's dicta of how the wise ought to believe, John Passmore shows that Hume does not think all our beliefs are as automatic as it sometimes seems but, rather, that Hume thinks "however vivid an idea may be, we ought sometimes be prepared to set it aside, temporarily at least" and so concludes that Hume does defend an "ethics of belief."⁵ Passmore does not try to explain how such an ethics of belief is *consistent* with his mechanistic story but seems to accept that there is unresolvable tension in Hume's writing on belief. More recently, there have been attempts to show that Hume's ranking of beliefs is consistent with his viewing belief as an idea enlivened by natural causes. For example, A. T. Nuyen has pointed out the necessary role reason plays in forming beliefs. He says, "Reason has to do its work for there to be beliefs. . . . Reason presents the possibilities to the mind, and our feeling-part either gives or fails to give its assent."⁶

David Owen has a similar, but more detailed, position. He says that to understand Hume's comments concerning which beliefs the wise ought to hold, we must recognize a distinction between those basic beliefs which are not produced by inference and those which are a result of complex, reflective reasoning. So, says Owen, "The most basic and original causal beliefs are produced . . . directly, by an association of ideas set up by past experience."⁷ But once these beliefs have been formed, we can use the "supposition that the future resembles the past" to engage in more complex, reflective causal reasoning. This is what we do when past experience is not entirely uniform, that is when the mind is not directly and immediately determined one way or another. When we have time, it seems, we can use this time wisely or unwisely. As Owen puts it: belief is the output of certain input (ideas, memories, general rules) conjoined with a mechanism of the mind; he says, "We cannot vary the mechanism, but we can vary the input;" that is "we can vary the context in which beliefs arise."⁸

The most extensive discussion of how Hume's theory of belief can make room for normative assessment of beliefs is found in Lorne Falkenstein's "Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism in Hume's Account of Belief." He argues that Hume has the resources to show how we can form meta-beliefs about our beliefs and that we can revise our beliefs according to these meta-beliefs. Further, we can be *blamed* for failing to revise them accordingly. Given that there are a number of belief form-

ing mechanisms, Falkenstein tells us, “It is possible that one might enjoin a belief that conflicts with the belief induced by another.”⁹ When this occurs, one belief can mitigate another, sometimes to the point of eradication of the first belief.

To see how belief revision is possible for Hume, consider his discussion of the effect of general rules on what we believe, found in *Treatise* 1.3.13. Hume wonders how it can be that even when faced with the lively impression of a witty Irishman, one can still maintain the belief that an “Irishman cannot have wit.” His answer is that the same principle which gives rise to our conclusions of causal reasoning produces our prejudiced beliefs, namely custom and habit. When faced with many instances of Irishmen conjoined with lack of wit, we conclude that there is a necessary connection between the two. But when we form beliefs of this kind, even against the evidence, we are mistaking “superfluous circumstances” with “the essential” (T 1.3.13.9; SBN 148). But we can use the more “extensive and constant” general rules that guide our causal judgments to “correct” the “propensity” to make such mistakes.

As Falkenstein puts it, we can “come to be naturally compelled to accept those ‘second’ general rules that Hume considers to be definitive of legitimate belief, and naturally compelled to revise or at least doubt our other beliefs accordingly.”¹⁰ Once we have accepted the second set of general rules, we can then actively apply them; that is, test our beliefs according to them, and this is how we can evaluate and revise our beliefs. So not only do we have control over altering input, or changing circumstances, when input is added that reveals a belief lacks good grounds, this will diminish its liveliness. Now if someone hasn’t developed these habits of reasoning, she will have much less control over what belief she forms and retains. But this seems exactly right; the level of control should correlate with the level of reflection.

Another example of such belief revision can be gleaned from Hume’s discussion of belief in miracles. The impression that is related to the idea of the existence of miracles is given by testimony. If I view someone as witnessing a miracle, the impression of this witness transfers its liveliness to the idea of the miracle the witness reports. So belief in miracles arises in a similar way as does a belief in an historical fact, stemming back to an original witness of the event. The idea of a miracle can be further enlivened by the sentiment of surprise and wonder along with the effects of education.¹¹

Suppose that you believe in miracles *and* you have been inculcated into the ways of the wise. If Hume’s argument convinces you that your belief is not formed on the basis of good reasoning, this will diminish the vivacity of idea so that it is no longer a belief. Once you have developed wise habits, it seems there is a shortcut from seeing a belief as lacking rational grounds to its alteration. We can proceed according to the general rule, “beliefs should be formed according to rules of good reasoning.” When we see that a belief was not so formed, its liveliness is diminished.

Falkenstein, and others, have shown that Hume's normative assessments of belief formation do not violate his theory of belief. For he has the resources to explain how he, Hume, *a wiseman*, has come to have a belief that certain kinds of rules ought to be followed when forming and assessing beliefs. When Hume says, "We compare the different sides of the contrariety and carefully weigh the experiments, which we have on each side" (T 1.3.12.7; SBN 133), the "we" to whom he here refers must be the "wise." For, the vulgar will not engage in such careful reflection. They will allow whichever side strikes them the most vividly to determine what they believe. That is, for the vulgar, there do not seem to be two kinds of belief; the habit of the mind always "operates immediately." Hume seems to think that whenever this immediacy is avoidable, it ought to be avoided. When you have the luxury of weighing evidence, and engaging in comparisons, you ought to indulge in it. But both the erroneous, unwarranted beliefs and the philosophically respectable ones are the result of custom "inlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object" of belief. Does Hume, then, have any basis on which to make his recommendation or is this just his own philosophical prejudice?

3. Why Is it Better to Be Wise?

One can view Hume's ranking of beliefs as purely descriptive. He has described a prevalent and important human practice, namely the practice of reasoning. This practice has developed with certain rules so that we can distinguish good reasoning from bad. We can say, according to the reasoning game, this belief is more warranted than that one, and those that follow the rules of the game correctly are epistemically responsible. That is, we can say the "wise," who play the reasoning game well, proceed in *this* way and form beliefs on *this* basis. But it seems Hume wants to go beyond mere description. He thinks it is *better* to follow reason, and strive to be wise, than to stick with vulgar, unreasonable habits.¹² As Passmore points out, though at times it seems Hume tries to adopt a merely descriptive attitude, being "the phenomenologist telling us what is included in our concept of wisdom," if this were the whole story, "his enterprise would be pointless. For he is *arguing against* those who accept miracles; he is exhorting the 'wise and learned,' the 'judicious and knowing' to become more sceptical."¹³ But, on what basis can he recommend reason over superstition or even over following your gut when reason is just one of the many natural causes of our belief?

Some of the authors mentioned above do venture some response to this question but none seems to capture what is central to Hume's recommendation. One answer to the question as to why we should regulate our beliefs according to the rules of reason is that doing so can provide us with warranted, or even true beliefs. We have seen that in Falkenstein's explanation of assessment of beliefs, what can

lead one to adopt the more constant and general rules as a guide to belief formation is the discovery that such rules tend to be more reliable and trustworthy, providing our beliefs with warrant and even truth.¹⁴

This answer does not take us very far. For it seems *constitutive* of proper reasoning that it provides warranted beliefs; what it *means* to regulate your beliefs wisely is that your beliefs will be warranted. In describing the rules by which we ought to judge of causes and effects, Hume thereby describes what provides beliefs with warrant. And it seems we can just as easily ask the question, “Why should we want warranted (or true) beliefs?” as we can ask “Why should we be wise?” It is a genuine question for it is not always clear that having true beliefs serves us well. As Páll Árdal points out, many false beliefs have favorable results; he points our attention to the timid man, for example, who might never have entered upon a worthwhile enterprise if he had true beliefs about the obstacles in his way.¹⁵ So there must be some value to being wise, (which entails a strong tendency to having warranted beliefs), even if in particular cases it would seem better to cling to a false belief.

In fact, I do not think Falkenstein answers the question as to the value of following reason by arguing that doing so provides us with warranted beliefs; his answer is more complex.¹⁶ He argues that what makes one naturally disposed to accept the rules of the wise is exposure to skeptical arguments. These arguments are available to anyone with even a modicum of curiosity and attentiveness. The way the belief-forming mechanism of the vulgar works, however, is grounded in “a despicable decision to ignore not only the task of inquiry, but even any consideration of reports of the simplest results undertaken by others—a decision grounded in laziness, imbecility, obstinacy or other such blameworthy character defects.”¹⁷ On this view, if I fault you for holding on to a prejudiced belief, what I am really doing is faulting you for having certain character traits such that, had you not had them, you would have attended to arguments which, in turn, would have led you to be naturally disposed to accept the more constant rules guiding causal judgment. This explanation of why we approve of the wise locates the approbation at the level of character. On this view, I am not blaming you directly for being an irresponsible believer but, rather, for being a deplorable person which in turn has led you to form beliefs irresponsibly.

This explanation does not answer the question why we should be wise. Rather, it offers one reason for cultivating our curiosity and attentiveness, in that doing so will allow us to form warranted or true beliefs. But it seems Hume would approve of someone with wise reasoning habits even if his adopting such habits did not stem from a laudable curiosity; he would approve even if the person was generally lazy and obstinate. There is something laudable about being the kind of person who regulates his beliefs wisely, independent of what caused him to be such a person.

One can also understand Hume's endorsement of wise belief forming habits as hedonistically grounded. This seems to be Don Garrett's view of what justifies Hume's endorsement of reason. In discussing *Treatise* 1.4.7, "Conclusion of this Book," Garrett presents Hume as simply describing an "ordered succession of natural moods":¹⁸ the mood of skeptical despair, the mood of spleen and indolence where one finds philosophy useless and ridiculous, the curious and ambitious mood which leads to a return to philosophy.

The motive to return to philosophy, according to Garrett, stems from "our desires for knowledge, reputation, and a safe and agreeable guide to topics lying beyond the narrow circle of everyday objects." Proper reasoning is the best way to satisfy these desires and so our own desires entitle us to commit to reason.¹⁹ Garrett ends his book by saying "reason augmented by our desires and inclinations provides the basis for an endorsement of reason. Reason is ultimately a kind of natural activity, one that leads us to approve at least of most of its own operations when we reflect on them in light of our desires and felt needs." But does this leave Hume (or me) with anything to say to those who do not have such desires and felt needs? Could I fault them in any way? It seems Garrett has not taken us any farther than explaining how Hume has been naturally led to endorse reason.

David Owen has gone a little farther in trying to answer what justifies Hume's preference for reason and it is his lead I would like to follow. His answer is that Hume's justification is essentially a moral one; the wise "have the virtues of reasonableness; they themselves are happier and better off, and more useful to society"²⁰ and so "the moral approval we feel towards the wise and reasonable person, on the grounds that the characteristics of that sort are pleasing and useful to their possessors and others, is the ultimate ground of Hume's preference for reason."²¹

Donald Ainslie has recently argued against a similar view, presented by Terence Penelhum, that Hume is a Socratic philosopher.²² What Ainslie takes Penelhum to mean by this is "that philosophy is *continuous* with our concerns of everyday life in that what we care most about requires each of us to wrestle with some of the deepest problems of philosophy. . . . Hume's project of uncovering the laws governing our minds is a way of making peace with our nature, and thus coming to have a happy life."²³ Ainslie wonders if Hume's attitude towards the benefit of self-knowledge is as straightforward as Penelhum suggests. Rather than freeing him from anxiety, it seems discovering the principles behind his fundamental beliefs leads Hume to a nervous collapse. When he returns to philosophy, he does so, according to Ainslie, just because it is a source of pleasure—on par with hunting and gaming. If this is right, Ainslie argues, then "in so far as Hume accepts the Socratic thesis, it must be relativized to the individual: philosophical self-knowledge is a route to a contented life for those who have a taste for it."²⁴ If you have an irrepressible desire for deep reflection, then Hume thinks it safer and preferable to follow his path of true skepticism, being cautious and modest in your

intellectual pursuits—rather than being led into false philosophy or superstition. But perhaps it's even better, says Ainslie, if one never has the taste for reflection at all. Hume says of those “honest gentlemen” whose thoughts never carry beyond their daily lives that “they do well to keep themselves in their present situation; and instead of refining them into philosophers, I wish we cou'd communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthly mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which wou'd serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are composed” (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272).

So, for Hume, is the unexamined life better than an examined one? What I think Ainslie *does* have right is that philosophical reflection will not always lead to personal contentment. Louis Loeb has recently made this point quite forcefully. Unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptic who thinks tranquility will follow upon the recognition that two opposing arguments have equal force, Hume finds that such equipollence leads to instability and disturbance. Here is Loeb's characterization of Hume's position on equipollence:

The second element of the Pyrrhonian position, the idea that we can achieve a settled condition in the presence of opposing arguments of equal strength, is mistaken. The presence of such arguments can lead to combat, struggle, and alternating cycles of assent, which the Pyrrhonian would regard as a dramatically unsettled doxastic condition. Coupled with the claim that an unsettled condition is disturbing or irritating, equipollence would be an unpleasant state.²⁵

Given that philosophical reflection will lead to such an unpleasant state, it seems odd to interpret Hume's preference for reason as based upon its contribution to a contented life. But it does not seem that, for Hume, a contented life and a valuable life are synonymous. Owen is right that Hume's recommendation to follow reason is essentially a moral one, but what type of virtue is it that the wise person possesses? What is the nature of Hume's approval for the wise person? According to Hume, a person's virtue “consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or *others*.”²⁶ He provides examples of each kind in considering a paragon of virtue called Cleanthes. His benevolence is useful to others, his assiduousness useful to himself, his wit and gallantry agreeable to others and his tranquility of soul agreeable to himself. Hume seems to think that one can locate the *main* source of approval for the various mental qualities we call virtues as falling predominantly into one of these four categories. The approval felt toward the mental quality of the wise, it seems, stems more from the wise person's character being useful to society than from it being agreeable to the possessor or others, or even useful to the possessor. I think Hume's preference and recommendation for following reason is *politically* motivated. The point is that the *world* will be a better

place if more people choose reason as their guide. We can see this if we survey the considerations Hume offers in favor of philosophy and abstract reasoning.

In the first section of the first *Enquiry*, Hume begins by contrasting the philosophy he calls “abstract,” “profound,” or “abstruse and accurate” with the “easy and obvious” kind. The latter “borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence” views humans as essentially sentimental and thus appeals to our feelings. These kinds of philosophers will always be preferred by “the generality of mankind” over those who “consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavour to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners” (EHU 1. 1–3; SBN 5–6). Hume suspects that “profound reasonings” are rejected without careful consideration and so proceeds “to consider what can reasonably be pleaded on their behalf” (EHU 1.7; SBN 9).

This abstract philosophy can be of help to the “easy” moral philosopher who is trying to influence people’s actions. For, having an accurate understanding of the “internal fabric” of the human mind will be helpful for one trying to successfully describe “the obvious and outward appearances of life and manners” (EHU 1.8; SBN 10). Hume likens the relationship between these kinds of philosophers to the relationship between an anatomist and the painter. Although the painter does not present a human figure the way an anatomist would, his art is benefitted by a knowledge of anatomy. Analogously, the easy philosopher is benefitted by a knowledge of the mind. But despite the potential value of abstract philosophy, it can also, Hume says, be a “source of uncertainty and error.” This occurs when either human vanity takes over and 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 says, “We must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate” (EHU 1.12; SBN 12). An “accurate scrutiny into the powers and faculties of human nature” can help us discover to which subjects our understanding is suited. If through a careful, cautious investigation we further our understanding of the nature and powers of our mind, then we have seen how philosophy, or reason, can be of value.

Another consideration in favor of philosophy is that if it is careful and accurate it can benefit the whole society by bestowing “a similar correctness on every art and calling” (EHU 1.9; SBN 10). Politicians, lawyers and generals, Hume says, would all do well to study philosophy. For it will lead them to possess more foresight, caution, understanding of the principles upon which they proceed.

Hume further discusses the value of reason and philosophy in section 12 of the first *Enquiry*. There, Hume says that the doubt that arises from philosophical reflection can be employed in a positive and constructive manner: namely to combat dogmatic opinions. It is Hume’s view that “a greater part of mankind”

tends to see only one side of a question and to consider nothing that contradicts, or mitigates, the principles to which they adhere. Exposure and attention to philosophical arguments (particularly of the skeptical kind), Hume says, “would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish . . . their prejudice against antagonists” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161).

We can see that such a tempering would lead to a diminishment in factions which are formed on the basis of perceiving and magnifying differences between one group and another. In a number of his political essays Hume fiercely condemns the influence of factions. In “Of Parties in General,” he says, “Factions subvert government, renders laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other.”²⁷ He also predicts in his “Idea of the Perfect Commonwealth” that if his vision was ever realized, it would be the rise of factions that would destroy it.²⁸

This tendency to divide is often based on very little of substance, or continues long after the cause for the quarrel is extinguished. If people were guided by reason they would see that such division is pernicious and would temper this tendency to divide.

Following reason can also minimize the tendency to be led into superstition. The human mind, Hume tells us, has a propensity to be subject to certain “unaccountable terrors and apprehensions.” If one has such fears and is ignorant, one can come to view such torments as being caused from unknown and powerful agents. The methods that such a person would take to appease these invisible and unknown enemies “are equally unaccountable and consist in ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which either folly or knavery, recommends to a blind and terrified credulity.”²⁹ Preying on such weakness and ignorance, those in power can bend the superstitious masses to their will, thus undermining liberty and tolerance. There is “nothing but philosophy” Hume tells us “able to entirely conquer these unaccountable fears”³⁰ and thus help prevent the dangers of superstition.

Lastly, philosophy is of value because it gratifies “an innocent curiosity.” It is one of “those few safe and harmless pleasures, which are bestowed on the human race” (EHU 1.10; SBN 11). It should be noted that this hedonistic justification for philosophy, the one which Ainslie emphasizes, comes almost as an afterthought; if you are lucky enough to have this kind of temperament, then you have another reason to do philosophy. This does not mean that those lacking the temperament ought not to reflect.

4. Motivation to Wisdom

I have been concerned with understanding how Hume would answer the question “why should we be wise?” I have sought to identify the source of his preference for

reason. But if *I* were trying to decide which path to follow, could Hume's reasons for preferring the path of the wise help motivate *me* in that direction? I think they could and that this is a further advantage of my explanation of the source of approval over the others canvassed.

We have seen that Hume offers a number of considerations that display the worthiness of reason. Attending to them makes us appreciate the value of reasoning and this appreciation can then increase our desire to engage in this practice. But all these considerations were already employing reason—can Humean reason have such an effect on our motivation? Well, even though it could not create a new passion, it can direct our attention in a way that will allow a dormant passion to be ignited. There are a number of places where we see reason playing this role. For example, when discussing the origin of government and how we can overcome our natural tendency to prefer immediate gratification to remote, long-term interests, Hume says, "As 'tis impossible to change or correct anything material in our nature, the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation" (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). Another example of how reason can direct or correct our inclinations is in the creation of the artificial virtues. Our rules of justice would not be invented if our reason did not discover that such rules would improve our circumstances greatly by restraining the partiality of our affections. Hume says that "nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections" (T 3.2.9; SBN 489).

We can come to see that observing the laws of justice is in our interest even though we may at times *feel* like it is not. It seems we could similarly convince ourselves that the path of reason is the path we ought to take even though we do not always *feel* like it is so.

The parallel with the rules of justice is helpful. Even though particular acts of justice may be disagreeable to oneself and even not seem useful, everyone engaging in just practices allows everyone to be better off. It is this fact which explains why we view it as a virtue. Hume says, "However single acts of justice may be contrary to either public or private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well being of every individual" (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497), and it is thus "a *sympathy* with *public* interest (that) is the source of the *moral* approbation, which attends that virtue" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499). Similarly, our approval of the wise does not stem from the agreeability of the wise person (as it seems Falkenstein suggests) or that engaging in such practices is agreeable to ourselves (as Garrett suggests). It is even the case that it is not always useful to oneself to be wise. Rather, everyone engaging in wise practices allows everyone to be better off.³¹

On Falkenstein's account, it is not clear what, if anything, you could do about altering your prejudiced belief, given your causal history. It seems unlikely that my (or Hume's) exhortations will do much good. On Garrett's account, you must

simply wait until your indolent mood is supplanted by your desire for knowledge or reputation. But if the reason to be wise stems from its contributing to a better world, consideration of this fact alone can augment one's motivation. Of course, this is presupposing that one *wants* the world to be a better, more just and stable place but, for Hume, such a desire seems to be closely tied with an original and universal principle of human nature, namely humanity or fellow-feeling. He says, everything "which contributes to the happiness of society recommends itself to our approbation and good-will" (EPM 5.17; SBN 219) and that "no man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others" (EPM 5.17n.; SBN 291 n.). If we all have this desire for general happiness that stems from sympathy, then the considerations put forth in favor of wisdom can move us all.

NOTES

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1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 1.3.13.7; and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978), 147. Hereafter I will refer to the *Treatise* parenthetically as "T" followed by book, part, section and paragraph numbers (as given in the Norton and Norton edition), followed by "SBN" and the page number as given in the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition.

2 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10. 4. and *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 110. Hereafter I will refer to the first *Enquiry* parenthetically as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph numbers (as given in the Beauchamp edition), followed by "SBN" and the page number as given in the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition.

3 The most extensive discussion of the different types of belief forming mechanisms is found in Lorne Falkenstein, "Naturalism, Normativity and Scepticism in Hume's Account of Belief," *Hume Studies* 23 (1997): 29–72. Although he only identifies three main types: reason, association and education, he provides a detailed analysis of the different ways that ideas can be enlivened by impressions (see 34–40). I will discuss some of Falkenstein's conclusions further below.

4 Hume struggles to find the appropriate adjective to describe the quality which distinguishes beliefs from ideas that are not believed. Besides force and vivacity, he calls it "firmness" and "solidity." In the Appendix, in addition to such adjectives, he says the following:

They [the objects of conviction and assurance] strike upon us with more force; they are more present to us; the mind has a firmer hold of them, and is more actuated or mov'd by them. It acquiesces to them. . . . In short, they approach nearer to impressions, which are immediately present to us. (Appendix 4; SBN 624).

5 John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 176.

6 A. T. Nuyen, "The Role of Reason in Hume's Theory of Belief," *Hume Studies* 14 (1988): 372–89, 378.

7 David Owen, *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 175. This distinction between reflexive and reflective reasoning is first made by David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 209.

8 Owen, 216.

9 Falkenstein, 42.

10 Falkenstein, 59. Norton makes a similar point in *Faith, Scepticism and Personal Identity*, ed. J. J. MacIntosh and H. A. Meynell (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994), 130. He says of voluntary doubt which naturally arises from reflection, "although it may not be able to extinguish any given belief, may nonetheless prevent that belief from rising to the height of dogmatic and intolerable certainty. Voluntary doubt can serve to moderate and mitigate belief."

11 Hume discusses how education can influence our beliefs in *Treatise* 1.3.9. The frequent repetition of an idea, starting in infancy, "infixes it in the imagination" and the imagination "may have ideas so strongly imprinted on it, and conceive them in so full a light, that they operate upon the mind in the same manner with those, which the senses, memory or reason present to us" (T 1.3.9.17,19; SBN 116–17). But again we can, and it seems Hume thinks we ought, use reason to combat these unreasonably formed ideas.

12 Jessica Spector has recently argued that Hume's empirical descriptions incorporate value, that his empirical account is "value laden." Her focus is on the passions, particularly the passions of pride and humility. She shows that, for Hume, the passional mechanisms which give rise to pride can be functioning properly or defectively. This notion of proper function, Spector argues, opens the door to the possibility of normative assessment. See Spector, "Value in Fact: Naturalism and Normativity in Hume's Moral Psychology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41 (2003): 145–63.

Spector's discussion will not help us with our current problem. For, we have seen that Hume can distinguish between proper and improper reasoning. The question is: why is proper reasoning better? It seems one can ask the same question in the realm of the passions. Even if we can make the kinds of normative assessments that Spector says we can, e.g., that I can be criticized if I remain proud of my friend who is cruel (156), why is it better to have a properly functioning passional life? One may respond that it is better to act as nature intends, but this is to invoke a teleology it seems Hume wants to avoid.

13 Passmore, 174.

14 This emphasis on warrant, may lead one to think that Falkenstein's answer to the question of why follow reason is that it provides us with warranted beliefs. We shall see, in a moment, that his view is actually more complex.

15 *Hume A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 104.

16 It was suggested to me by an anonymous referee for this journal that that value or goal of belief-regulation could be the goal of having warranted or true beliefs. The referee seemed to interpret Falkenstein as offering this as the candidate value. While I think this is not Falkenstein's answer, it is a possible answer to the question of why we ought to follow reason and an important one to address.

17 Falkenstein, 60.

18 Garrett, 232. A similar view of *Treatise* 1.4.7 is found in Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991). There she says that after Hume reviews the conclusions that lead to sceptical despair, from the point where he describes nature curing him of his philosophical melancholy on "the moves are dictated by feeling, are swings of moods, not zigzags of argument. The transitions are not by a realization of intellectual incoherence in the earlier phase, but merely by the incompleteness of the initial mood, its natural fate of supplementation by a successor mood" (Baier, 20–1). In Oliver Johnson, *The Mind of David Hume* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), he makes a similar point, somewhat more contentiously; he says "Hume justifies his philosophizing hedonistically" (324).

19 Garrett takes the following quotation from Hume to establish something like a normative epistemic principle: "Where reason is lively, and mixes with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate upon us (T.1.4.7.11; SBN 270). Garrett terms this the "Title Principle" which gives us license to follow reason when it mixes with our natural sentiments.

20 Owen, 212. Although Falkenstein discusses character traits, he says very little about what constitutes the wise person's character, concentrating instead on what is wrong with the vulgar. Owen is here following Årdal in characterizing the object towards which we feel approval in the wise as a virtue, and in calling that particular quality of mind which the wise person possesses "reasonableness." Årdal does not, however, limit the virtue of reasonableness to the domain of the wise for he seems to link reasonableness very closely with practical benefits. Thus what might be reasonable for the scientist will not necessarily be reasonable for the vulgar. Whether there is such a virtue as discussed by Årdal is not a question I can pursue here. I am interested, as is Owen and Falkenstein, in why Hume approves of the quality of mind possessed by the wise and disapproves of the vulgar; what kind of virtue does he see the wise as possessing?

21 Owen, 220.

22 See Donald Ainslie, "Hume, a Scottish Socrates? Critical Notice of Terrence Penelhum, *Themes in Humes: The Self, The Will, Religion*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33 (2003): 133–54. In the preface to his book, Penelhum says, "I see Hume as a philosopher who is squarely in the Socratic tradition . . . because he sees philosophy as a source of liberating self-knowledge." My purpose here is not to evaluate Penelhum's claims but to address Ainslie's criticisms against a view that is shared by Owen, Garrett, Falkenstein,

and others—namely that Hume thinks philosophy and careful, cautious reasoning are good for those who engage in them.

23 Ainslie, 134.

24 Ibid., 153.

25 Louis E. Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

26 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.1 and *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, 268. Hereafter I will refer to the second Enquiry parenthetically as “EPM” followed by section and paragraph numbers (as given in the Beauchamp edition), followed by “SBN” and the page number as given in the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition.

27 *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987), 55.

28 Ibid., 529.

29 “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” in Miller, 74.

30 Ibid., 75.

31 Árdal makes a brief reference to a possible parallel between the virtue of justice and that of reasonableness. He says that Hume does not want to deny the usefulness of a particular false belief “anymore than he wants to deny the usefulness of an isolated act of injustice” (Livingston and King, 104). In both cases it is something about the system as a whole that we value.

