

Hume's Sceptical Texts 5: Conclusion of this Book (*Treatise* 1.4.7)

Treatise 1.4.7, entitled "Conclusion of this Book", is notoriously difficult to interpret, partly because of the intense first-personal voice in which it is expressed from the first sentence to the last. Some interpreters – notably Annette Baier (1991) and Don Garrett (1997) – see this as all carefully choreographed and under control. Others suggest that Hume is here losing control of his scepticism.

5.1 The General/Trivial Distinction again

Crucial background to this section is the General/Trivial Distinction that Hume introduced – "in order to justify myself" – at *T* 1.4.4.1, between two classes of principles of the imagination:

- Those that are "**permanent, irresistible, and universal**"; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes". In *T* 1.4.7 he calls these **general** and **established** principles.
- Those that are "**changeable, weak, and irregular**", such as the fancies of the ancient philosophers and those who are "tormented ... with the apprehension of spectres in the dark". In *T* 1.4.7 he calls these **trivial** principles.

We shall see this distinction coming under increasing pressure, and apparently breaking down at *T* 1.4.7.7 when faced with the upshot of Hume's "scepticism with regard to reason" (*T* 1.4.1). When it does break down, it faces Hume with "a very dangerous dilemma" and a sceptical crisis.

5.2 The catalogue of sceptical concerns

The section starts with Hume very rhetorically expressing his lack of confidence in his faculties, as revealed by his previous investigations (§§1-2). He then starts itemising the relevant weaknesses:

§3 "After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou'd assent to it; and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects strongly in that view, under which they appear to me." – here we have the theory of belief as a forceful and vivacious idea.

"Experience is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others, which are not attended with the same advantages." – here we have the theory of induction linked with the theory of belief.

"Without this quality, by which the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others (which seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason) we cou'd never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses." – in saying that the enlivening of ideas is "seemingly ... trivial", this appears to hint that it will count as a Trivial principle (though this appearance is misleading – enlivening of ideas is crucial to Hume positive theory of belief).

"Nay, even to these objects we cou'd never attribute any existence, but what was dependent on the senses; and must comprehend them entirely in that succession of perceptions, which constitutes our self or person. Nay farther, even with relation to that succession, we cou'd only admit of those perceptions, which are immediately present to our consciousness, nor cou'd those lively images, with which the memory presents us, be ever receiv'd as true pictures of past perceptions. The memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas."

So far, however, we have seen nothing *seriously* sceptical in the sense of potentially undermining Hume's own theoretical ambitions – nothing that is *corrosively* sceptical in that sense. As long as we are prepared to accept that our beliefs are dependent on custom etc., we have no reason to relinquish them.

§4 “... 'Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects; and 'tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu'd existence of external objects, when absent from the senses. But tho' these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter.”

This is more serious, threatening a “manifest contradiction” in the form of the “direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses” which Hume identified at *T* 1.4.4.15. This does seem to constitute a tension even within the General principles (given that our belief in “the continu'd existence of matter” should presumably be classed as “permanent, irresistible, and universal”).

§5 “... Nothing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phaenomenon; ... We wou'd not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect; that tie, which connects them together; ... And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir'd by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other? Such a discovery not only cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes; since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning.”

This is the strongest statement outside the ten “purple paragraphs” of *Treatise* 1.3.14.19-28 where Hume seems to commit himself to radical subjectivism about causal necessity. Elsewhere in the *Treatise*, and throughout the *Enquiry*, he is overwhelmingly objectivist about causation (as constant conjunction etc.).

5.3 The “very dangerous dilemma” and sceptical crisis

§6 “[We are generally unaware] that in the most usual conjunctions of cause and effect we are as ignorant of the ultimate principle, which binds them together, as in the most unusual and extraordinary. But this proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions. This question is very difficult, and reduces us to **a very dangerous dilemma**, which-ever way we answer it. For **if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy**; beside that these suggestions are often contrary to each other; they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity. ...”

§7 “But on the other hand, **if [we resolve to] reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding, that is, to the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination**; even this resolution, if steadily executed, wou'd be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences. For I have already shewn,[footnote to *Treatise* 1.4.1] that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.”

This is where the destructive result of the *T* 1.4.1 Regress Argument makes an entrance, supposedly showing that faithful adherence to the General principles – which Hume here refers to as constituting “the understanding” – would lead to total scepticism. We avoid such a result, as Hume has argued at *T* 1.4.1.10, through what he will later (at *T* 1.4.2.47) call “carelessness and inattention” – and this seems clearly to be a Trivial rather than General principle. Thus we get to the dangerous dilemma:

“We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them with so sensible an impression, as we do those, which are more easy and natural. **Shall we, then, establish it for a general maxim, that no refin’d or elaborate reasoning is ever to be receiv’d?** Consider well the consequences of such a principle. By this means you cut off entirely all science and philosophy: You proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination, and by a parity of reason must embrace all of them: And you expressly contradict yourself; since this maxim must be built on the preceding reasoning, which will be allow’d to be sufficiently refin’d and metaphysical. **What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties? If we embrace this principle, and condemn all refin’d reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all.** For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. ...”

This leads to the depths of Hume’s personal sceptical crisis, vividly expressed:

§8 “The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? ... What beings surround me? ... I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty.”

5.4 From the study to common life

Then Hume’s mood changes when he moves back into common life:

§9 “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, ... I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”

He finds himself “absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life” (§10). And in the “splenetic humour” (cross and ill-humoured) of the sceptical crisis, he feels “ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire”. Philosophy, it seems, loses out to nature:

§10 “I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles.”

He feels under no obligation to “strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure” by instead continuing to “torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries”, especially when he has no confidence that this will lead him to truth. And he now seems to decide firmly against “such an abuse of time” which can serve no good end: “If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* [i.e. *with certainty*] are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable.”

5.5 The Title Principle

In the next paragraph, however, his mood changes from “spleen and indolence” (crossness and laziness) to good humour, and likewise his view of philosophy:

§11 “These are the sentiments of my spleen and indolence; and indeed I must confess, that philosophy has nothing to oppose to them, and expects a victory more from the returns of a serious good-humour’d disposition, than from the force of reason and conviction. In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ’tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us.”

The underlined sentence is very well known in modern Hume scholarship, since Garrett (1997, pp. 233-7) drew prominent attention to it, and dubbed in “The Title Principle”.

5.6 Returning to philosophy

In this “good-humour’d disposition”, Hume again finds philosophy attractive:

§12 “At the time, therefore, that I am tir’d with amusement and company, ... I ... am naturally inclin’d to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation. I cannot forbear having 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. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform’d; decide concerning truth and falshood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed.”

Thus Hume expresses his *curiosity*, and he goes on to express *ambition* – it is these two sentiments that motivate him back to philosophy:

“I am concern’d for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou’d I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I feel I shou’d be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy.”

5.7 Preferring philosophy to superstition

Besides which, it is very natural to indulge in “speculations without the sphere of common life” (§13), because we are all naturally curious: “’tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action”. The crucial issue, therefore, is “the choice of our guide” when we venture into remote subjects: should we rely on philosophy, or on superstition (i.e. religion)? That, Hume suggests, is a pragmatic choice:

§13 “we ought to prefer [the guide] which is safest and most agreeable. And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination. For as superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions. Philosophy on the contrary, if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities. ... Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.”

5.8 Remaining down to earth and modest

Philosophy is not for everyone, however, and Hume is happy to leave the “many honest gentlemen ... in England” who rarely think about objects beyond their senses, to “their domestic affairs” and “common recreation” (§14). Indeed many speculative philosophers could do with “a share of this gross earthy mixture, ... to temper those fiery particles, of which they are compos’d”:

§14 “While a warm imagination is allow’d to enter into philosophy, and hypotheses embrac’d merely for being specious and agreeable, we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience. But were these hypotheses once remov’d, we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination. ... For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction. Human Nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto the most neglected. ’Twill be sufficient for me, if I can bring it a little more into fashion; and the hope of this serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevail upon me. If the reader finds himself in the same easy disposition, let him follow me in my future speculations. If not, let him follow his inclination, and wait the returns of application and good humour. The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so over-whelm’d with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it. A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them.”

Hume ends the section by remarking that – even if we approach philosophy with due modestly – we are inclined to get carried away by confidence when we make “an exact and full survey of an object”:

§15 “On such an occasion we are apt ... [to] make use of such terms as these, *’tis evident*, *’tis certain*, *’tis undeniable*; which a due deference to the public ought, perhaps, to prevent. I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others; but I here enter a caveat against any objections, which may be offer’d on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other.”