

Hume's Practically Epistemic Conclusions?

Hsueh Qu

1. Introduction

The inoffensive title of THN 1.4.7,¹ 'Conclusion of this Book', belies the convoluted treatment of scepticism contained within. It is notoriously difficult to decipher Hume's considered response to scepticism in this section, or whether he even has one. In recent years, however, one line of interpretation has gained popularity in the literature. The 'usefulness and agreeableness reading' (henceforth U&A) interprets Hume as arguing in THN 1.4.7 that our beliefs and/or epistemic policies are justified on the basis of their usefulness and agreeableness to the self and others; proponents include Ardal (1976), Owen (1999), Ridge (2003), Kail (2005), and McCormick (2005), while Schafer (forthcoming) also defends an interpretation along these lines.²

In this paper, I will argue that although U&A has textual merit, it struggles to maintain a substantive distinction between epistemic and moral justification – a distinction that Hume insists on in claiming that 'Laudable or blameable, therefore, are not the same with reasonable or unreasonable' (THN 3.1.1.10).³ Hume seems to take the sceptical arguments of THN 1.4.7 as leaving no trace of epistemic justification whatsoever in its wake, yet he seems to treat some beliefs as epistemically justified; this means that the justificatory arguments of THN 1.4.7 (the only time he addresses these sceptical arguments in the

¹ In references to Hume's texts throughout the paper, 'THN' refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, 'EHU' to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 'EPM' to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and 'EMPL' to *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Arabic numerals refer to section and paragraph numbers (EHU and EPM), or to book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN). EMPL numbers refer to pages in the Miller revised edition of the *Essays* (Liberty Fund Inc., 1987).

² There are of course differences among these accounts; for example, Ridge emphasises immediate agreeableness to oneself, while McCormick emphasises usefulness to society.

³ I do not wish to substantively define epistemic normativity in this paper on pain of begging the question against U&A. I will only roughly characterise it (hopefully uncontroversially) as the primary kind of evaluation to which beliefs are subject that determines their philosophical legitimacy.

Treatise) must make up this shortfall in epistemic justification. Yet this requires U&A to maintain that for Hume, both moral and epistemic justification are founded on usefulness and agreeableness, threatening to collapse any distinction between the two.

I then attempt to carve out the logical space for there being a distinctly epistemic notion of justification founded on usefulness and agreeableness by differentiating the relevant underlying dispositions: moral justification concerns the usefulness and agreeableness of sentiment-forming dispositions, while epistemic justification concerns the usefulness and agreeableness of belief-forming dispositions. However, I find that such an account is problematic for two reasons: first, it cannot take advantage of the textual support for U&A, since THN 1.4.7 emphasises the usefulness and agreeableness of the sentiments of curiosity and ambition; secondly, such an account is incompatible with Hume's account of the intellectual virtues.

2. Hume's Conclusions in THN 1.4.7

Let us examine the nexus of Hume's consternation in this section, that is, the 'dangerous dilemma' (THN 1.4.7.6-7). Hume notes that we should not trust 'every trivial suggestion of the fancy', because 'they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities' (THN 1.4.7.6), as he has shown in the course of Book 1 (c.f. in particular THN 1.3.13, 'Of Unphilosophical Probability'). Yet if we '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' (THN 1.4.7.7). This second horn of the dangerous dilemma is the upshot of Hume's discussion in 'Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason' (THN 1.4.1): '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' (THN 1.4.7.7). This is because the 'rules of logic' (THN 1.4.1.6) require that we continually make higher-order judgments on the reliability of our judgments, but given the ineliminable possibility of error, Hume thinks this entails the persistent diminution and

eventual extinction of our beliefs. In light of this, Hume claims that '[w]e 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' (THN 1.4.7.7).

Upon posing this puzzle, Hume dismisses a potential rejoinder of establishing 'it for a general maxim, that no refin'd or elaborate reasoning is ever to be receiv'd' (THN 1.4.7.7) for three reasons. First, it would entail that we 'cut off entirely all science and philosophy' (*ibid.*); secondly, it would mean that we 'proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination, and by a parity of reason must embrace all of them' (*ibid.*); thirdly, such a principle would be self-stultifying, 'since this maxim must be built on the preceding reasoning, which will be allow'd to be sufficiently refin'd and metaphysical' (*ibid.*). Given the untenability of this option, Hume thinks that we are threatened by a 'dangerous dilemma': either we allow all the trivial suggestions of the fancy and fall into error and absurdity, or we dismiss them and forfeit all our beliefs: that is to say, '[w]e have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all' (*ibid.*). This forced choice implies a choice between excessive scepticism and superstition, both of which Hume explicitly argues against in the course of THN 1.4.7. Wholly trusting reason alone leads to excessive scepticism, but allowing every propensity naturally leads to superstition, which is the result of fear, weakness, and melancholy (EMPL 74). Hume is aiming for a middle ground that will allow for science and philosophy, while nevertheless keeping out excessive scepticism and superstition.⁴

This dialectic reveals Hume's interest in two related but nevertheless distinct issues:

- a) What is the best epistemic policy to adopt?
- b) What is the justification for this policy?

⁴ Hume mentions philosophy more than he does science in THN 1.4.7, but his interest in the latter is confirmed by his claim that forbidding all abstruse reasoning will 'cut off entirely all science and philosophy' (THN 1.4.7.7). Indeed, it seems that for Hume, science encompasses philosophy; he describes his own *Treatise* (which he clearly considers philosophy) as an endeavour falling under the 'science of man' in his introduction to it.

That (a) is one of Hume's concerns is obvious, but that (b) is so is less clear, and I will briefly motivate reading Hume as concerned with (b). That Hume is concerned with *justifying* the epistemic policy that rescues us from scepticism is highlighted by his second objection to the maxim that we reject all refined and elaborate reasoning. Hume dismisses this epistemic policy because if we accept some trivial suggestions of the fancy, we have *no principled reason* not to accept them all. This consideration would be irrelevant if Hume were only concerned with arriving at the best epistemic policy capable of circumventing the dangerous dilemma without being worried about its justification; Hume rejects this policy in part because there is no *justification* for adopting it over the policy of allowing all the trivial suggestions of the fancy. Similarly, his third worry of self-stultification also seems to concern justification: Hume rejects this policy because it directly undermines our reason for adopting it, since the methodology by which we arrived at this policy would count as unjustified by its own measure. In short, Hume is not merely searching for the best epistemic policy, but also for the justification of such a policy.⁵

Upon confronting the dangerous dilemma, Hume takes us on a personal tour of his emotional turmoil. First, he is beset with 'melancholy and delirium' (THN 1.4.7.9), which is dispelled by amusement and company (famously taking the form of dining with friends and playing backgammon). This engenders a period of 'spleen and indolence' (THN 1.4.7.11), in which Hume rejects philosophy. Near the end of this period, Hume endorses what Garrett (1997, p. 235) calls the 'Title Principle', the importance of which Garrett rightly emphasises:

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. (THN 1.4.7.11)

This principle is pivotal in facilitating Hume's return to philosophy. Tiring of amusement and company, Hume finds that his inclination to pursue philosophy returns, due to the surfacing

⁵ This does not mean that we are to *arrive* at such an epistemic policy by means of reasoning about justification, as Garrett (2005) points out. Indeed, Hume seems quite insistent that reasoning cannot lead us to the correct epistemic policy, which explains why he is eventually led to the Title Principle via 'a serious good-humour'd disposition' rather than through 'philosophy' (THN 1.4.7.11). However, upon arriving at an epistemic policy, we should confirm its acceptability by reasoning about its justification.

of his passions of curiosity and ambition. As Schafer (forthcoming) argues, the passions of curiosity and ambition are exactly the propensities that Hume refers to in the Title Principle, as they are the propensities that align (or ‘mix’) most naturally with reason. Adopting the Title Principle as an epistemic policy licenses Hume to return to his philosophical endeavours once his passions of curiosity and ambition resurface; therefore, the natural result of adopting the Title Principle as an epistemic policy is the pursuit of philosophy, at least for those who have a disposition to curiosity and ambition. Hume also notes that, even without the passions of curiosity and ambition, he would have no recourse but to return to philosophy anyway, since humankind cannot rest content with enquiries concerning common life:

Since therefore '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, we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that 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. (THN 1.4.7.13)

Given the choice between superstition and philosophy as a guide to such speculations, Hume chooses philosophy on the basis that it is safer: ‘the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous’ (*ibid.*).⁶

3. The Theme of Usefulness and Agreeableness in THN 1.4.7

This provides an answer to (a): the epistemic policy that Hume adopts is the Title Principle. But what of the answer to (b): that is, what is the justification for this epistemic policy? The theme of usefulness and agreeableness runs prominently through THN 1.4.7; these qualities therefore seem likely candidates for the source of the Title Principle’s justification.

One plausible construal of THN 1.4.7 is as justifying the Title Principle against competing epistemic policies on the basis of its usefulness and agreeableness. Hume’s search

⁶ Note that Hume typically takes ‘superstition’ to refer to a form of religion (EMPL 74); in thinking superstition dangerous, Hume probably had in mind religious wars.

for a suitable epistemic policy in THN 1.4.7 can be understood as seeking an answer to the following question: ‘under what circumstances should we assent to reason?’ The Title Principle advocates assenting to reason only when lively and mixed with some propensity.⁷ There are two natural alternatives to this epistemic policy:⁸ first, assenting to reason at all times (whether mixed with a propensity or not); secondly, never assenting to reason (instead following our propensities).⁹

Hume argues that following the Title Principle is superior to the former alternative: assenting to reason at all times falls on one horn of the dangerous dilemma, as it leads to the persistent diminution and eventual destruction of our beliefs; unsurprisingly, Hume thinks this outcome ‘dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences’ (THN 1.4.7.7). In contrast, the pursuit of philosophy (which is the result of adopting the Title Principle, for the curious and ambitious) is immediately agreeable:

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. (THN 1.4.7.12)

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. (THN 1.4.7.14)

Moreover, the propensity of curiosity is itself responsive to considerations of usefulness and agreeableness, as Owen (1999) and Ridge (2003) note: our curiosity is only piqued when the

⁷ These two criteria of ‘liveliness’ and ‘mixing with some propensity’ are related, as associated propensities can enliven reasoning. Going into the mechanics of such a process within Hume’s psychological framework is a complicated matter, and would take me too far afield.

⁸ Hume has already dismissed another alternative policy of assenting to reason except for where it is ‘refin’d or elaborate’ in THN 1.4.7.7.

⁹ Of course, these two positions are caricatures of Hume’s opponents. Sceptics will not *always* assent to reason, and superstitious people do of course sometimes assent to reason. But in attacking these caricatures, Hume is using exaggeration to highlight the problems with both these positions. Sceptics may not be left absolutely belief-free, but they will be left with far fewer beliefs than they should have. Superstitious folk will not so fully pursue their fancies as to completely avoid the judgments of reason, but they avoid it enough that they may be dangerous to society (for instance, they might avoid in-depth reasoning about whether a benevolent God would approve of Holy Wars).

discovery of truth is agreeable due the ‘genius and capacity’ required to discern it (THN 2.3.10.3), and when the truth concerned is of some use (THN 2.3.10.4).¹⁰ Similarly, Hume’s ambition is ‘of contributing to the instruction of mankind’, thus ‘acquiring a name’ by his ‘inventions and discoveries’ (THN 1.4.7.12); the successful pursuit of such an ambition is clearly useful to society, as well as agreeable to Hume himself.¹¹ The Title Principle is therefore more useful and agreeable than assenting to reason at all times, since the latter can be dangerous and disagreeable, while the former results in the useful and agreeable pursuit of philosophy for the curious and ambitious.

The second alternative of abandoning reason in favour of our propensities is no better. Hume takes it to manifest itself in superstition, which is a form of religion that results from our passions of fear and melancholy when untempered by reason and mixed with weakness:

Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of
SUPERSTITION. (EMPL 74)¹²

Superstition is a product of these passions, together with weakness and *ignorance*. Ignorance is typically a product of the lack of exercise of reason; in other words, superstition is the product of weakness, fear and melancholy when *unmixed with reason*.^{13,14}

¹⁰ That being said, one should not overstate the importance of utility to the passion of curiosity. As Gelfert (forthcoming) points out, Hume thinks utility important to curiosity not because it enhances the passion, but merely because it provides an initial focus for our attention, which is then sustained by our enjoyment of the subsequent exercise of genius (THN 2.3.10.6).

¹¹ Schafer (forthcoming) argues that curiosity and ambition are closely related; our intellectual ambition will only be fulfilled by reasoning that satisfies the curiosity of our ‘epistemic community’.

¹² Hume’s essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ was written much later than the *Treatise*, of course; nevertheless, it seems plausible that Hume’s opinions on the nature of superstition did not change considerably in the intervening time.

¹³ This might be seen as begging the question against the sceptic, who will argue that ignorance (viz. a lack of knowledge) is inevitable whether or not reason is present. Clearly, Hume does not have the sceptic in mind in this passage, which appears in his essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’; here, it should be uncontroversial to read Hume as thinking ignorance to result from a lack of reason. However, Hume holds that always assenting to reason also undermines knowledge, since it destroys our beliefs. The key is to find the right balance in assenting to reason, which is Hume’s concern in THN 1.4.7.

¹⁴ Given that Hume considers Catholicism to result from superstition, one might object that Catholic theologians mix their propensities with reason, and therefore superstition can arise when mixed with reason. Of course the claim that superstition arises from a lack of reason is an empirical generalisation, and admits of exceptions. However, the Catholic theologian need not be such an exception. We may distinguish two epistemic phases that the Catholic theologian undergoes: first, he abides by fear and melancholy untempered by reason (superstition)

In pointing out the superiority of philosophy over superstition, Hume points out that the latter is dangerous: ‘the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous’ (THN 1.4.7.13). Moreover, superstition is also often *disagreeable* to the person himself and to others, as Hume’s discussion of the monkish virtues makes clear:

...the whole train of monkish virtues... serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor encrease his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. (EPM 9.3)

Given that the natural product of accepting the Title Principle – that is, philosophy, for the curious and ambitious – is more useful and agreeable than the natural product of abandoning reason and blindly following our propensities – that is, superstition – the Title Principle is justified over this alternative epistemic policy.¹⁵

To reiterate, Hume is justifying the Title Principle over alternative epistemic policies on the basis of its usefulness and agreeableness. The Title Principle results in philosophy (for the curious and ambitious) while the two alternatives examined by Hume typically result in excessive scepticism and superstition respectively:

Always Assenting to Reason: Results in excessive scepticism.

Never Assenting to Reason: Results in superstition (for the weak, fearful, and melancholic).

and comes to believe in Catholicism; then, he tries to use reason to justify this belief. His arriving at superstition is very much a product of his passions when unmixed with reason; obviously, his adopting reason later to attempt and justify his superstition does not produce his initial superstition, and so his superstition is partly a product of his lack of reason, though it may subsequently be mixed with reason.

¹⁵ Durland (2011, p. 81) and Winkler (1999, p. 211 fn. 21) argue that the Title Principle cannot recommend philosophy over superstition. As argued above, I think the Title Principle does recommend philosophy over superstition: since superstition is the product of a lack of reasoning, it cannot be an instance of lively reason mixing with a propensity. In correspondence, Don Garrett suggests that the Title Principle might be thought to rule out superstition in a different but similar way: superstition is not ultimately approved of by reason since it might, for example, violate reason’s rules by which to judge of causes and effects (THN 1.3.15), and so would not be an instance of lively (considered) reason mixed with a propensity.

Assenting to Reason Only When Mixed with Propensities (Title Principle):

Results in philosophy (for the curious and ambitious).¹⁶

Heeding the Title Principle is more useful and agreeable than either abiding by reason alone or abiding by our propensities alone, because philosophy is useful and agreeable, while both excessive scepticism and superstition are dangerous and disagreeable. Therefore, U&A allows Hume to justify philosophy over superstition and excessive scepticism.

Ridge (2003) ably defends U&A in great detail, but structures his case differently. He points out that with respect to morality, Hume judges a character trait virtuous if it satisfies one or more of the following criteria: it is agreeable to the self, agreeable to others, useful to the self, or useful to others. Tellingly, Hume seems to justify the pursuit of philosophy by appealing to exactly these four criteria:

- a) It is agreeable to the self:
 - Philosophy is pleasurable (THN 1.4.7.12; THN 1.4.7.14).
- b) It is agreeable to others:
 - If we persist in excessive scepticism, we will be ostracised because the operations of sympathy engender others to share in our misery; everyone ‘keeps at a distance’ because they dread ‘that storm’ that beats upon us (THN 1.4.7.2).
- c) It is useful to the self:
 - Torturing one’s brain by succumbing to excessive scepticism is an ‘abuse of time’ (THN 1.4.7.10).
- d) It is useful to others:
 - Philosophy is safe, while superstition is dangerous (THN 1.4.7.13).

¹⁶ Although philosophy and superstition both result from propensities, they result from *different* propensities: philosophy results from curiosity and ambition (along with reason), while superstition results from fear and melancholy (with weakness, in the absence of reason). This is because reason mixes most naturally with curiosity and ambition, therefore encouraging these propensities: a strong faculty of reason, frequently exercised, makes it easier to discover interesting and useful truths, and such successes encourage us to further pursue these propensities. As Hume notes: ‘curiosity... requires youth, leisure, education, genius, and example, to make it govern any person’ (EMPL 113); in other words, curiosity requires (among other factors) a strong and active faculty of reason (that is, genius) in order to be effective. The pleasure derived from the exercise of reason in accordance with curiosity and ambition dispels melancholy (as Hume narrates in THN 1.4.7), and it presumably dispels fear as well; moreover, the exercise of reason is capable of curing intellectual weakness.

For the most part, I agree with Ridge's textual evidence, but I think that my explication on behalf of U&A in terms of justifying the Title Principle against alternate epistemic policies better captures Hume's dialectic in THN 1.4.7.¹⁷ In any case, however you cut it, there is considerable textual evidence for U&A in this section.

4. Hume's Distinction between Moral and Epistemic Normativity

However, I think that U&A proves unsatisfactory, despite the significant textual substantiation in its favour. One *prima facie* objection stems from Hume's claim in THN 1.4.7 itself that we should not accept hypotheses merely for being agreeable:

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. (THN 1.4.7.14)

Elsewhere, Hume also emphasises that considerations of usefulness or dangerousness are irrelevant to epistemic concerns:

There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than in philosophical debates to endeavour to refute any hypothesis by a pretext of its dangerous consequences to religion and morality. When any opinion leads us into absurdities, 'tis certainly false; but 'tis not certain an opinion is false, because 'tis of dangerous consequence. (THN 2.3.2.3; cf. EHU 8.26)

Again, Hume makes clear that hypotheses should be judged on the basis of their truth or probability of truth, rather than on the basis of their dangerous consequences. Similarly in the *Enquiry*, Hume pursues and recommends the 'accurate and abstruse' philosophy, despite recognising that the 'easy and obvious philosophy' is by many 'recommended, not only as more agreeable, but more useful than the other' (EHU 1.3). I think these passages are

¹⁷ Schafer (forthcoming) also ably defends a version of U&A that gives the Title Principle a central role, although the exact details differ from mine.

problematic for U&A and require addressing,¹⁸ but I will not further pursue this particular objection in this paper. Rather, I will focus on another objection that I take to be decisive. I will go on to argue that there is a substantive distinction between moral and epistemic normativity for Hume; I then argue that U&A threatens to collapse this distinction.

i) A Substantive Distinction between Moral and Epistemic Normativity

Philosophically, it seems that there is an intuitive distinction between moral and epistemic normativity. Imagine that an evil demon threatened to inflict much misery and suffering on the world unless you agreed to be compelled to falsely believe that grass is white. It would be morally right to choose to be compelled to believe that grass is white, but it would nevertheless seem epistemically wrong.

This intuitive distinction also seems a textual one, as Hume himself seems to draw a clear distinction between moral and epistemic justification. Examine the following:

Actions may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable: Laudable or blameable, therefore, are not the same with reasonable or unreasonable. (THN 3.1.1.10)

‘Laudable’ and ‘blameable’ are clearly terms of moral approbation and blame for Hume (c.f. THN 3.3.1.11, THN 3.1.2.3, THN 3.1.1.3). And Hume typically uses ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ as terms of epistemic approbation and blame. For instance, he describes philosophical probability as *reasonable* foundations of belief and opinion in THN 1.3.13.1; he describes the production of certain proofs in metaphysical subjects as ‘reasonable’ in THN 1.2.5.21; he claims that his account of necessity is ‘reasonable’ in THN 1.3.14.26; and he seeks to establish the principle of allegiance to government on more ‘reasonable’ principles in THN 3.2.9.2. Furthermore, Hume often uses ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ hand-in-hand with other unambiguously normative terms, for example, when he describes the fictions of

¹⁸ THN 1.4.7.14 and EHU 1.3 are admittedly theoretically consistent with Hume’s accepting beliefs only *partly* on the basis of their agreeableness and/or usefulness, as well as on the basis of other factors; however, this seems to run contrary to the tone of THN 1.4.7.14 especially. Moreover, THN 2.3.2.3 and EHU 8.26 seem fairly clear that even partially judging beliefs on the basis of their dangerousness is unacceptable.

the ‘antient philosophy’ as ‘unreasonable and capricious’ (THN 1.4.3.1). Moreover, the reading of ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ as terms of epistemic approbation and blame in THN 3.1.1.10 is especially plausible given that it is contrasted with the unambiguously moral appellations ‘laudable’ and ‘blameable’. Thus, it seems that Hume distinguishes between moral and epistemic normativity in THN 3.1.1.10, arguing that the former but not the latter applies to actions.¹⁹

Further positive support for reading Hume as claiming the distinctness of moral and epistemic normativity can be found in Hume’s clearly normative aims in THN 2.3.3 and THN 3.1.1,²⁰ aims which are directly substantiated by the claim that moral normativity is distinct from epistemic normativity; moreover, other claims to the same effect can be found elsewhere in these sections.

In THN 2.3.3 Hume attacks not only the descriptive thesis that reason is causally opposed to the passions, but also the normative thesis that we should be guided by reason:

NOTHING is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, ’tis said, is oblig’d to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, ’till it be entirely subdu’d, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle. (THN 2.3.3.1)

¹⁹ A quick objection that might be raised here is that Hume believes actions can be unreasonable when mixed with a false judgment (THN 3.1.1.12). However, it seems clear from this passage that Hume does not think that passions and actions can be *genuinely* reasonable or unreasonable: they can be at best unreasonable ‘in a figurative and improper way of speaking’ (*ibid.*). Hume repeats a similar claim about the passions being derivatively unreasonable in THN 2.3.3.6, and again emphasises that ‘even then ’tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment.’

²⁰ I take THN 2.3.3 to be highly relevant to the interpretation of THN 3.1.1, since Hume’s argument in THN 3.1.1 (that morals cannot be derived from reason, since reason alone cannot motivate while morals can), turns on the result of Hume’s argument in THN 2.3.3 (that reason alone cannot motivate); indeed, Hume refers back to THN 2.3.3 in a note in THN 3.1.1.8.

In this passage, Hume is clearly concerned with normative issues as well as causal ones: he talks of virtue, giving preference to reason, obligation, and oughts. In addition to the causal thesis that the passions and reason causally oppose each other, Hume also takes himself to argue against the normative claim that reason is to be normatively privileged over the passions in the practical realm. Against the backdrop of this stated goal, it makes perfect sense for Hume to argue that reason and the passions cannot be normatively compared, as they possess different forms of normativity.²¹ Hume similarly has the normative aim in THN 3.1.1 of showing that ‘Moral distinctions [are] not deriv’d from reason’. Given this aim, it makes perfect sense for Hume to argue that actions (which are subject to moral normativity) are *not* subject to epistemic normativity; the fact that these two forms of normativity are distinct motivates the thesis that moral normativity does not derive from reason, which is the faculty traditionally viewed as concerned with epistemic normativity.

Indeed, Hume makes normative claims to the effect that passions and actions are not subject to epistemic normativity in order to substantiate these normative aims in both THN 2.3.3 and THN 3.1.1:

Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chuses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither *justify nor condemn* it. (THN 2.3.3.6, emphasis added)

...actions do not derive their merit from a conformity to reason, nor their blame from a contrariety to it; ... reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by *contradicting or approving* of it. (THN 3.1.1.10, emphasis added)

Here Hume seems to argue that passions and actions cannot be subject to epistemic appraisal: he claims that reason cannot *justify or condemn* the passions, nor *contradict or approve* of

²¹ Of course, Hume does argue that reason cannot motivate as well, which also tells against the view that we should be guided by reason rather than the passions. My point here is merely that this normative aim of Hume’s makes it perfectly natural for him to also claim that reason and passions possess different forms of normativity, therefore explaining why he seems to make such a claim in the course of this argument.

actions, and epistemic normativity is traditionally viewed as reason-based.²² This renders it likely that when Hume denies that passions and actions can be reasonable or unreasonable, he means that they cannot be subject to epistemic normativity; this reading is particularly plausible given Hume's undeniably normative aims in THN 2.3.3 and THN 3.1.1, and given also the fact that Hume often uses the terms 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' to indicate epistemic approbation and blame. Thus, read naturally, Hume's distinction between laudability and blameability on the one hand, and reasonableness and unreasonableness on the other, seems to be a distinction between moral and epistemic approbation and blame.

Given that actions are subject to moral but not epistemic normativity, moral normativity is therefore distinct from epistemic normativity. But this still leaves open the possibility that epistemic normativity is a subset of moral normativity: perhaps something can be subject to moral but not epistemic normativity (e.g. actions), but nothing can be subject to epistemic but not moral normativity. For instance, U&A could argue that epistemic normativity is just moral normativity as applied to beliefs. To rule out this possibility, we need a case in which something was a subject of epistemic normativity but not moral.

Hume duly obliges in THN 3.1.1, wherein he argues that moral distinctions are not derived from reason:

... these errors [of beliefs relating to conduct] are so far from being the source of all immorality, that they are commonly very innocent, and draw no manner of guilt upon the person who is so unfortunate as to fall into them... No one can ever regard such errors as a defect in my moral character. (THN 3.1.1.12)²³

²² There is an interpretive controversy about whether Hume uses 'reason' and 'the understanding' interchangeably. Millican (2002) argues for the equivalence thesis, but Garrett (1998) disagrees, thinking that the understanding encompasses reason along with intuition; note that Garrett reads 'reason' more narrowly than Millican does. In any case, on either reading, it is true that reason cannot justify or condemn the passions, on the plausible enough assumption that a subset of the understanding cannot justify or condemn something if the understanding itself cannot do so.

²³ My treatment of this passage owes a great deal to very helpful discussions with Karl Schafer and Cian Dorr.

Here Hume argues that errors in beliefs relating to conduct (either of falsely determining the propensity of an object to produce pain or pleasure, or of mistaken means-end reasoning) do not imply any ‘guilt’ and are ‘innocent’; the context of this claim (his arguing that *moral* distinctions are not derived from reason, and that errors of belief are not the source of *immorality*) makes clear that Hume means *moral* wrongdoing – and indeed, ‘guilt’ seems to more naturally imply moral rather than epistemic wrongdoing.²⁴ Moreover, Hume goes on to say that ‘no one can ever regard such errors as a defect in my moral character’. Assuming that beliefs can only be morally culpable when related to conduct (an assumption that Hume seems to adopt in THN 3.1.1.12 in limiting his discussion to such beliefs), and assuming that for something transient to be morally culpable, it must signify a defect in moral character (an assumption that Hume argues for in THN 2.3.2.6 and THN 3.3.1.4 – I discuss this in more detail shortly), this claim implies that beliefs are not morally culpable. Therefore, Hume is here making the point that mistaken beliefs are not subject to moral appraisal.^{25,26}

²⁴ Hume goes on to claim that these errors in belief ‘extend not beyond a mistake of *fact*, which moralists have not generally suppos’d criminal, as being perfectly involuntary’ (THN 3.1.1.12). One should be careful not to read Hume as straightforwardly citing the involuntariness of belief as the reason for this innocence, as Ridge (2003, p. 172) does. Hume unreservedly endorses the claim that false beliefs are not morally blameable while being careful to put the ‘involuntariness’ basis for this claim in the mouths of ‘moralists’ – note also the hedging terms ‘commonly’ and ‘generally suppos’d’. Hume wields this argument from involuntariness as an *ad hominem* attack against his rationalist opponents, who typically accept ‘Ought implies (voluntary) Can’ while maintaining that moral turpitude derives from false beliefs. Indeed, were Hume to agree with the moralists on this matter, this would create a tension with his claim in THN 3.3.4.3 that natural abilities are subject to moral appraisal despite being involuntary. I argue that Hume rejects ‘Ought implies (voluntary) Can’ in my ‘Hume’s Doxastic Involuntarism’ (work in progress).

²⁵ In correspondence, Cian Dorr and Karl Schafer independently object that Hume only states that errors of belief are ‘commonly’ very innocent, which leaves open the possibility that they are sometimes not innocent. They propose that in THN 3.1.1.12 Hume is merely pointing out the implausibility of errors in beliefs that are related to actions being the sole source of moral blameworthiness given that such beliefs are usually blameless, without committing himself to the thesis that beliefs are not subject to any moral appraisal whatsoever. However, Hume’s statement that ‘No one can ever regard such errors as a defect in my moral character’ is not qualified in the same way, and it seems that his point is the stronger one that beliefs are not subject to moral appraisal, as argued above.

²⁶ It might be objected that in judging mistaken beliefs to be ‘innocent’ and to ‘draw no manner of guilt’, Hume is passing a *moral* verdict on them, and so beliefs are subject to moral appraisal. Against this, it may be replied that the adjective ‘innocent’ is commonly used to indicate that a creature is not subject to moral appraisal, for instance when we describe small children and animals as ‘innocent’. A toddler may perform mischievous acts; when we describe her as innocent we do not mean that she is a paragon of virtue, but rather that, being undeveloped in many morally relevant ways, she is not properly an object of moral judgments.

However, errors in belief clearly can imply epistemic wrongdoing, for example prejudices, which are ‘errors’ that we ‘rashly form’ (THN 1.3.13.7), and ‘superstitious delusions’ (EHU 10.2), which Hume takes to be refuted by his argument on miracles. And indeed, in THN 3.1.1.12 itself Hume refers to taking ‘false measures’ for attaining one’s end as ‘foolish’, which suggests epistemic condemnation of such errors. This in turn means that beliefs are subject to epistemic but not moral appraisal; therefore, epistemic normativity is not a subset of moral normativity. Given the result that moral normativity is not a subset of epistemic normativity (since actions are subject to the former but not the latter), this implies a non-trivial distinction between moral and epistemic normativity.²⁷

ii) U&A Collapsing the Distinction between Moral and Epistemic Normativity

Having established that Hume maintains a substantive distinction between epistemic and moral normativity, we can now spell out how U&A threatens to collapse it. Prior to the positive arguments of THN 1.4.7 (viz. the arguments justifying a return to philosophy and science), the sceptical arguments have left Hume with no reason for assenting to his beliefs:

After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give *no reason* why I shou’d assent to it... (THN 1.4.7.3, emphasis added)

Hume also notes that he cannot justify the reasonableness of reasoning and philosophy, nor the prospects of establishing truth and certainty through them:

... I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application [of reasoning and philosophy], nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. (THN 1.4.7.10)

²⁷ It may be objected that Hume denies a distinction between epistemic and moral normativity in THN 3.3.4, wherein he argues against there being a substantive distinction between natural abilities and moral virtues. I will address this objection later in Section 6b of this paper; indeed, rather than hindering my position, this passage ultimately reinforces it.

Similarly, he remarks that philosophy ‘has nothing to oppose’ the sentiments of his spleen and indolence which engender his abandonment of science and philosophy, and it is unable to prevail by relying on ‘the force of reason and conviction’ – in short, Hume thinks there to be no philosophical nor reason-based justification for science and philosophy:

These are the sentiments of my spleen and indolence... *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*. (THN 1.4.7.11, emphasis added)²⁸

These remarks seem to indicate that, prior to the positive justificatory arguments of THN 1.4.7, the sceptical arguments of Book 1 Part 4 leave beliefs devoid of any epistemic justification.

Nevertheless, Hume takes beliefs to possess epistemic justification. He takes some beliefs to be reasonable (c.f. for example THN 1.3.13.1; THN 1.2.5.21; THN 1.3.14.26; THN 3.2.9.2), and as argued previously, ‘reasonable’ is typically a term of epistemic approbation for Hume, particularly when applied to beliefs.²⁹ Moreover, Hume’s distinguishing epistemic from moral normativity in THN 3.1.1.10 suggests that the former does not have an empty extension – it would be a peculiar move to distinguish the two if one of them failed to refer – and it is difficult to see how epistemic normativity would not concern beliefs in any way. Thus, it seems that beliefs hold some measure of epistemic justification for Hume.

²⁸ Hume uses ‘sentiments’ frequently in his philosophical works in a variety of ways. He often uses it to indicate emotions, but he also often uses it to indicate beliefs or opinions (e.g. THN 1.2.2.3; THN 1.3.13.14; THN 1.3.14.12; THN 1.4.2.14; THN 1.4.2.50, etc) as well. The context of THN 1.4.7.11 clearly clarifies that Hume means by ‘sentiments of my spleen and indolence’ his belief that he ‘cannot satisfy [himself] concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application [of reasoning and philosophy], nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty’ (THN 1.4.7.10).

²⁹ One possibility is that Hume is merely being disingenuous when he speaks of beliefs being justified, or when he continues on his positive naturalistic project. Broughton (2004) suggests a view in this spirit, arguing that Hume continues post-THN 1.4.7 in a detached or ironic manner. A full discussion of this interpretation would take me too far afield, but briefly, I find that interpretation along these lines come with tremendous interpretive costs in treating Hume as speaking somewhat insincerely in such a wholesale manner.

Since the positive arguments of THN 1.4.7 are the only instances in the *Treatise* where Hume addresses and overcomes the negative sceptical arguments of Book 1 Part 4, it seems that it is here that the shortfall in epistemic justification must be made up. The negative sceptical arguments of Book 1 Part 4 – THN 1.4.7 in particular – seem to leave beliefs with no justification whatsoever, and the positive arguments must rectify this to make sense of Hume’s pronouncements. In other words, THN 1.4.7 must grant beliefs some measure of epistemic justification.

Schafer (forthcoming) also argues that THN 1.4.7 has to offer epistemic rather than moral justification. In similar vein to my argument above, he points out that a purely moral justification would leave Hume an epistemic sceptic, which fits poorly with ‘the *manner* in which he endorses the forms of reasoning he uses in his work’, nor does Hume ever cancel the epistemic implications of this manner by giving any indication that his endorsements of various forms of reasoning rest on moral rather than epistemic grounds. Schafer also argues that there are important disanalogies between the justificatory project of THN 1.4.7 and Hume’s account of moral justification. Notably, Hume tunnels in on the ‘intellectual’ passions of curiosity and ambition in THN 1.4.7; however, Hume’s discussion of the moral virtues addresses a wider range of passions, and indeed curiosity and ambition are not especially prominent with respect to Hume’s treatment of moral evaluation. Thus, Hume does not seem to be engaging in a straightforwardly moral justification in THN 1.4.7.³⁰

However, THN 1.4.7 offering epistemic justification seems to render U&A problematic: a notion of epistemic justification grounded on usefulness and agreeableness

³⁰ Schafer argues that THN 1.4.7 provides epistemic justification, but suggests that for Hume, epistemic justification is a subset of moral justification. He says: ‘An intellectual trait is an *epistemic virtue* just in case it receives the approval of the "moral sense"... *because* it tends to satisfy the curiosity and ambition of the believer and those in his "epistemic community" under normal circumstances.’ Insofar as receiving approval from the moral sense seems to entail moral justification, it seems that intellectual traits are epistemically justified (that is, virtuous) insofar as they are morally justified in a particular way, which points to the subset view. I think the subset view is problematic in light of THN 3.1.1.12, as I argued previously in this section.

threatens to collapse the distinction between epistemic and moral normativity, since the latter also stems from usefulness and agreeableness:

...PERSONAL MERIT consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*. (EPM 9.1)

To address this objection, U&A needs some way to make logical space for a notion of epistemic normativity as distinct from moral normativity, while maintaining that Hume thinks epistemic justification to derive from usefulness and agreeableness. I shall explore such an option in the following section.

5. Drawing a Distinction Between Epistemic and Moral Normativity.

Let us examine the differences between moral and epistemic normativity that Hume highlights. As seen in THN 3.1.1.10 above, one crucial difference between the two is that *actions* are subject to moral normativity (in virtue of being laudable or blameable), while *beliefs* are subject to epistemic normativity (in virtue of being reasonable or unreasonable). Note also that the fundamental subject of normativity (that is, the basis on which we are normatively assessed) in general has to be a durable disposition. Hume argues that actions are too transient to excite our sentiments of love, hatred, pride and humility:

Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. (THN 2.3.2.6)

If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character. Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider'd in morality. (THN 3.3.1.4)

According to Hume, actions play only a derivative, *informative* role in moral evaluations, insofar as they convey information about the fundamental subject of moral normativity, viz. the underlying durable disposition. Similarly, beliefs, being lively ideas, are likewise transient; thus, they are unsuited to being the fundamental subjects of normativity, since they cannot provoke the sentimental response that Hume thinks essential to normativity.³¹ Therefore, it is only the underlying belief-forming dispositions that are sufficiently durable to play this role.

In light of this, the proponent of U&A might be inclined to argue that there is in fact adequate logical space to distinguish epistemic from moral normativity, while still founding both on usefulness and agreeableness. According to this line, the fundamental subjects of moral normativity are sentiment-forming dispositions such as benevolence, gratitude, charity, greed, envy, and so forth; the sentiments produced by these dispositions in turn produce laudable or blameable actions. Note that these dispositions have to be sentiment-forming rather than directly action-forming, since an action would not count as virtuous if not performed for virtuous motives (that is, if not motivated by virtuous sentiments): ‘By the intention we judge of the actions, and according as that is good or bad, they become causes of love or hatred’ (THN 2.2.3.3). On the other hand, the fundamental subjects of epistemic normativity are *belief-forming* dispositions. This is why beliefs – like actions in the moral case – may be derivatively subject to epistemic appraisal (because they result from epistemically evaluable dispositions), while actions and passions cannot (because they result instead from morally evaluable dispositions).³² Although both moral and epistemic normativity derive from usefulness and agreeableness, they differ in virtue of their fundamental subjects, and this allows us to distinguish the two.

³¹ Loeb (2002) argues that Hume is fundamentally committed to a dispositional account of beliefs, although his official theory treats them as occurrent. I agree with Marusic (2010) that this is unsatisfactory because it fails to make sense of the causal role that Hume thinks beliefs play in his psychology.

³² Hume’s taking actions to fall under the domain of moral normativity despite beliefs also contributing to the production of actions doubtless stems from his hyperbolic dismissal of reason’s importance in the production of actions: ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them’ (THN 2.3.3.4). Given this characterisation of motivation, it is unsurprising that Hume takes the production of actions as falling under the jurisdiction of the passions.

Importantly, note that this seems to be the *only* way to distinguish the two species of normativity within U&A's framework. To establish this, let us examine Hume's normative framework in more detail. Hume says frustratingly little regarding his epistemic framework, but he is more forthcoming on his moral framework, and it is from here that we shall draw guidance. Hume thinks that moral judgments are directed at persons:

The constant and universal object of hatred or anger is a person or creature endow'd with thought and consciousness; and when any criminal or injurious actions excite that passion, 'tis only by their relation to the person or connexion with him. (THN 2.3.2.6)

As we have just seen, persons are morally evaluated on the basis of their dispositions (THN 3.3.1.4). More specifically, persons are normatively evaluated on the basis of certain features of their dispositions; in the moral case, these features are usefulness and agreeableness (EPM 9.1). Thus, according to Hume's moral framework, moral judgments follow the following schema:

We judge a person X on the basis of her disposition Y in virtue of feature Z

Where X = any moral agent, Y = underlying dispositions, and Z = usefulness and agreeableness.

Importantly, there is good reason for thinking this schema to generalise to epistemic judgments. Normativity of any kind requires durability, and so it seems the proper subject of epistemic evaluations should be underlying dispositions. Once this is granted, it seems natural that the primary subject of epistemic evaluation should be the persons who possess these dispositions, since belief-forming dispositions seem a strange sort of thing to praise or blame and love or hate directly.³³ Moreover, these dispositions have to be evaluated in virtue of

³³ In correspondence, Don Garrett and Lisa Downing independently point out the possibility of the primary object of epistemic evaluation being beliefs rather than the agents who possess them. I think that this possibility seems unlikely for a few reasons. First, beliefs are too transient to provoke the sentimental response that Hume thinks essential to normativity, and so it seems that belief-forming dispositions must be involved; once belief-forming dispositions are involved, it is natural to think that the persons who possess them should be the primary objects of epistemic evaluation, for the reason given above. Moreover, epistemic evaluations depend on factors beyond the beliefs themselves, e.g. the grounds for holding them. No contingent beliefs are in themselves

some feature or the other. Thus, it seems that for Hume, epistemic judgments – like moral judgments – involve evaluating a person X on the feature of her relevant disposition Y in virtue of its feature Z.

According to U&A, feature Z is the same for both moral and epistemic normativity, and X is the same as well (i.e. persons). The only remaining variable that can distinguish the two is the fundamental subject Y of normative judgments, that is, the disposition on which we normatively assess the agent who possesses it: moral normativity concerns *sentiment-forming* dispositions, while epistemic normativity concerns *belief-forming* dispositions.³⁴

One might nevertheless object to an account of epistemic normativity that makes no reference to truth or probability of truth. Such a form of justification would be ‘epistemic’ in name only; surely any theory of rationality is a poor one if it does not incorporate a veritistic element in some capacity.

unreasonable (one can always construct some complicated backstory that makes any non-necessary belief more or less reasonable); in thinking someone unreasonable for holding a particular belief, we are really thinking him unreasonable for holding this belief on some grounds or the other. Holding a belief on grounds is something only agents can do, and so it seems that the primary object of epistemic evaluation has to be believers rather than beliefs. Arguably, the grounds on which we hold a belief are only informatively significant insofar as they reveal one’s underlying epistemic character, in the same way in which the grounds on which we perform a virtuous action (viz. our intentions) are important (THN 2.2.3.3), but only insofar as they signify underlying moral character. Ridge (2003, p. 180) agrees that for Hume, epistemic appraisals concern durable dispositions: he argues that ‘if Hume is making a moral argument in “Conclusion of this book” it must be an argument in favor of some character trait’, and furthermore takes the ‘senses and understanding’ (THN 1.4.7.10) as ‘an adequate characterization of the durable principle of mind [Hume] aims to defend’.

³⁴ In correspondence, Don Garrett suggests that the proponent of U&A could distinguish moral normativity from epistemic normativity by the differing sentiments they evoke in the assessor: moral normativity evokes *moral* approbation or blame, while epistemic normativity evokes *epistemic* approbation or blame; there need not be any other distinguishing fact of the matter. This seems implausible to me. Say that for U&A, X, Y and Z really are the same in moral and epistemic judgments (and I later argue that this is in fact the case). In that case, there would be no basis for moral and epistemic judgments involving different sentiments where X, Y and Z are identical in both cases. Surely such a distinction in our sentiments evoked, when so widespread and systematic, should correspond to some external difference. Even if such a systematic distinction in our sentiments should be entirely baseless, it remains mysterious why Hume would insist on this distinction (as argued in the previous section), rather than merely dismissing it as groundless, or ignoring it in his philosophy. It thus seems likely that Hume envisions some external difference between moral and epistemic normativity, and therefore it seems that one of X, Y or Z must differ for U&A to adequately distinguish moral from epistemic normativity. Drawing a parallel to the impression of necessary connection might prove enlightening here: although this impression does not *correspond* to anything external to us (because it is an internal impression, like normative sentiments), it is nevertheless *responsive* to external factors; this is made evident by Hume pointing out in his ‘Rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ (THN 1.3.15) the external criteria that a veridical impression of necessary connection should accord with. Similarly, it seems that any distinction between specifically moral and epistemic sentiments should correspond with a distinction between *some* external moral and epistemic factors, i.e. the underlying disposition that is evaluated, the normatively relevant properties of this disposition, or the possessor of this disposition.

Against this, it can be replied that such an account is in fact able to incorporate truth in a meaningful way. Examine the case of useful or agreeable sentiment-forming dispositions. Sentiment-forming dispositions typically only manifest their usefulness or agreeableness to the possessor and to others insofar as they produce actions.³⁵ But passions alone are not sufficient to motivate action; a belief or set of beliefs is required as well. In judging a passion to be useful or agreeable to others, we examine its tendency to produce useful and agreeable actions given *common* background conditions – hence why ‘virtue in rags is still virtue’ (THN 3.3.1.19). Statistically, most people’s beliefs have a tendency to be true, and so these common background conditions will include true beliefs. For example, benevolence is useful to others, because given correct beliefs about the world (such as knowledge of what actions help others), benevolence tends to produce useful actions; without such knowledge, it could easily be dangerous instead.

The epistemic case is directly analogous to the moral case. A belief-forming disposition is useful or agreeable if the beliefs it produces are useful or agreeable. Some beliefs are intrinsically useful or agreeable to the person himself (such as stable or comforting beliefs; true beliefs also tend to be agreeable in the long run, insofar as it is disagreeable to discover the falsity of our beliefs), but the majority of beliefs are only useful or agreeable insofar as they contribute to the production of useful or agreeable actions. In judging a belief to have a tendency to contribute to the production of useful or agreeable actions, we assume as a background condition that the individual has ‘good’ passions, because statistically, most people have a tendency to have ‘good’ passions.³⁶ But given that a person has ‘good’ passions, the sort of beliefs that tend to contribute to the production of useful or agreeable

³⁵ Although some qualities may be immediately agreeable to the individual even without causing any actions (cheerfulness, for example), these are not the norm.

³⁶ This is more controversial than assuming a backdrop of true beliefs, and those with more pessimistic outlooks on human nature will probably disagree with this presupposition, but Hume, with his sunny view of human morality as driven by natural sympathy, would probably be unmoved by such pessimism.

actions will be true beliefs! For instance, a benevolent person requires basic knowledge of how she can bring about pleasurable and prevent painful things beliefs in order to usefully act on her benevolence. In general, useful or agreeable beliefs will tend to be true beliefs, assuming the presence of ‘good’ passions. Indeed, in discussing the belief-forming disposition that is custom, Hume explicitly relates its usefulness to its truth-conduciveness:³⁷

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; and though the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with the other works of nature. Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species, and the regulation of our conduct, in every circumstance and occurrence of human life. Had not the presence of an object instantly excited the idea of those objects, commonly conjoined with it, all our knowledge must have been limited to the narrow sphere of our memory and senses; and we should never have been able to adjust means to ends, or employ our natural powers, either to the producing of good, or avoiding of evil. (EHU 5.21)

Here Hume emphasises the usefulness of custom, which is ‘so necessary to the subsistence of our species’, precisely because it is truth-conducive in that it ensures a ‘correspondence’ between ‘the course of nature’ and ‘the succession of our ideas’, which makes for ‘a kind of pre-established harmony’. In short, Hume thinks that belief-forming dispositions are useful or agreeable insofar as they are truth-conducive, and this allows us to maintain an account of epistemic normativity founded on usefulness and agreeableness while still retaining a close connection to truth, even if there might be corner cases whereby the two come apart. And indeed, even when they do come apart, truth often takes precedence, because it is the *tendency* for belief-forming dispositions to be useful and agreeable that matters, regardless of actual usefulness and agreeableness – as Hume notes, ‘virtue in rags is still virtue’ (THN

³⁷ I discuss the justificatory role of custom with respect to Hume’s scepticism about induction in the *Enquiry* in more detail in my “Hume’s Positive Argument on Induction” (forthcoming).

3.3.1.19) – and beliefs-forming dispositions have a tendency to be useful or agreeable insofar as they have a tendency to produce *true* beliefs.

6. Objections to this Distinction

We have examined a strategy that U&A may employ to attempt to maintain a distinction between moral and epistemic normativity: distinguish their fundamental subjects. Indeed, we have seen that this seems to be the only way that U&A can draw a distinction between these two forms of normativity, since they share the object (persons) and grounds (usefulness and agreeableness) of normative evaluation. However, there are two reasons why such an interpretation is untenable. First, it fails to take advantage of the textual support for U&A in the first place. Secondly, Hume seems to rule out the distinguishing of the fundamental subjects of moral and epistemic normativity in THN 3.3.4.

a) The Textual Evidence in THN 1.4.7

Recall the textual evidence for U&A in THN 1.4.7. In comparing philosophy to superstition, it is plausible that Hume is concerned with the usefulness and agreeableness of belief-forming dispositions. Philosophy is the result of the belief-forming disposition of reason when lively and mixed with some propensity (THN 1.4.7.11); meanwhile, superstition is characterised as a product of reason's absence, that is, ignorance (EMPL 74). What makes the justificatory difference between philosophy and superstition is the presence of the belief-forming disposition of reason in the former but not the latter. Therefore, on the U&A account sketched in this paper, it is plausible that Hume is concerned with epistemic justification in recommending philosophy over superstition, because he is here concerned with belief-forming dispositions.

However, such an account fails to accommodate Hume's justification of philosophy over excessive scepticism, because this justification does not turn on the usefulness or

agreeableness of *belief-forming* dispositions. The Title Principle advocates assenting to reason only when lively and mixed with some propensity (THN 1.4.7.11), and abiding by this principle is more useful and agreeable than always assenting to reason (even when unaided by any propensities). As noted earlier, the propensities relevant to the return to philosophy are curiosity and ambition, which play a major role in turning Hume back to philosophy from his spleen and indolence; curiosity and ambition make the justificatory difference between philosophy and excessive scepticism. After all, excessive scepticism is a product of wholly adhering ‘to the understanding, that is, to the general and more establish’d properties of the imagination’ (THN 1.4.7.7); therefore, philosophy and excessive scepticism are both products of assenting to reason,³⁸ and the two thus share the same belief-forming dispositions.

Consequently, the difference between them must come down to the presence of the propensities of curiosity and ambition in the case of philosophy, versus their absence in excessive scepticism. Both philosophy and excessive scepticism, as forms of abstruse enquiries involving subtle reasoning, are naturally unlively:

...the conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy. (THN 1.4.1.11).

However, philosophical enquiries are subsequently enlivened by mixing with the propensities of curiosity and ambition. Sceptical arguments, on the other hand, do not enjoy the same good fortune, since they mix with no propensities. The continued iteration of higher-order judgments that led to the sceptical horn of the dangerous dilemma is ‘forc’d and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure’ (THN 1.4.1.10); Hume makes a similar comment regarding false philosophy (which encompasses excessive scepticism) more generally:

³⁸ As mentioned in footnote 22, there is a controversy about whether for Hume, ‘reason’ is equivalent to ‘the understanding’. On either reading, it is true that philosophy involves reason while superstition does not.

Philosophy... 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. (THN 1.4.7.13)

Thus it is the passions of curiosity and ambition that render philosophy justified in accordance with the Title Principle, in contrast to excessive scepticism.³⁹

However, if epistemic normativity only concerns belief-forming dispositions, and Hume is providing an account of epistemic justification in THN 1.4.7, then the passions of curiosity and ambition would not be relevant. Indeed, it is the *sentiment-forming* dispositions that produce curiosity and ambition which render philosophy justified and scepticism unjustified; according to U&A's framework above, this points to a decidedly *moral* justification of the former over the latter. This makes little sense of how beliefs can be *epistemically* justified – that is, reasonable – in the face of scepticism, since there is no epistemic justification for adopting any given belief over forgoing it in line with excessive scepticism. Yet Hume clearly does hold many beliefs to be reasonable (THN 1.3.13.1; THN 1.2.5.21; THN 1.3.14.26; THN 3.2.9.2) and thus epistemically justified. Therefore, there is reason to doubt that U&A is the correct interpretation of Hume's justificatory endeavours in THN 1.4.7.

b) The Intellectual Virtues

I will present my final criticism of U&A via a slightly circuitous route, by first refuting a potential objection to my claim that Hume distinguishes moral from epistemic normativity;

³⁹ In correspondence, Cian Dorr argues that there is a narrower sense of belief-forming dispositions according to which philosophy and excessive scepticism do not share the same belief-forming dispositions: philosophy will include a belief-forming disposition to form beliefs such as the belief that there is an oncoming bus, while excessive scepticism (the extinction of all our beliefs) will not. Nevertheless, Hume individuates belief-forming dispositions in a wider sense in THN 1.4.7 in terms of the belief-forming disposition of reason, which both philosophy and excessive scepticism share. Moreover, it seems clear from Hume's dialectic that the point of contrast Hume wishes to draw is between the passions of curiosity and ambition in the case of philosophy (which subsequently enliven beliefs) and their absence in excessive scepticism, and so it seems that the justificatory role is played by the passions rather than by belief-forming dispositions construed in this narrow way.

an examination of the relevant passage provides a segue into my criticism of U&A. The passage in question is THN 3.3.4.1:

No distinction is more usual in all systems of ethics, than that betwixt *natural abilities* and *moral virtues*; where the former are plac'd on the same footing with bodily endowments, and are suppos'd to have no merit or moral worth annex'd to them. Whoever considers the matter accurately, will find, that a dispute upon this head wou'd be merely a dispute of words, and that tho' these qualities are not altogether of the same kind, yet they agree in the most material circumstances. They are both of them equally mental qualities: And both of them equally produce pleasure; and have of course an equal tendency to procure the love and esteem of mankind... Since then natural abilities, tho', perhaps, inferior, yet are on the same footing, both as to their causes and effects, with those qualities which we call moral virtues, why shou'd we make any distinction betwixt them? (THN 3.3.4.1)

These natural abilities include 'a quick... apprehension', 'a clear head', 'a copious invention', 'a profound genius', and 'a sure judgment' (THN 3.3.4.6), which are belief-forming dispositions, and therefore epistemic qualities. Consequently, it might be argued that Hume in fact rejects any substantive distinction between epistemic and moral normativity.

However, I think such an interpretation to be mistaken. In this passage, Hume is not denying a substantive distinction between moral and epistemic normativity. Rather, he is simply making the point that intellectual qualities can be morally assessed on the basis of their usefulness and agreeableness to the possessor and the others, and so it makes little sense to label benevolence a moral virtue, but deny a profound genius this appellation. As he notes, natural abilities 'are on the same footing... as to their causes and effects' to moral virtues; since both these entities are 'equally mental qualities', 'equally produce pleasure', and have 'an equal tendency to procure the love and esteem of mankind', there is little grounds on which to take one to be morally significant but not the other. However, this leaves it open that a profound genius can also be *epistemically* assessed on the basis of (say) its truth-conduciveness, and also count as an *epistemic* virtue; thus, Hume's remarks here are entirely

consistent with his maintaining a distinction between moral and epistemic normativity. To read Hume as making the much stronger claim in THN 3.3.4 that there is no distinction between moral and epistemic normativity would be textually suspect (since THN 3.3.4 does not imply this claim, and since we have seen textual evidence elsewhere that he does in fact think there to be such a distinction), and also philosophically suspect (since we find such a distinction intuitively compelling); therefore, neither considerations of textual faithfulness nor charity recommend this interpretation.

Indeed, far from rescuing U&A, this passage provides a decisive objection to it. If, as argued above, Hume points out in THN 3.3.4 that the intellectual virtues are morally on a par with the moral virtues, then Hume must think that belief-forming dispositions can be the fundamental subject of moral normativity. However, Hume must think these belief-forming dispositions to be epistemically evaluable as well for there to be scope for any realm of epistemic normativity: recall that occurrent beliefs are too transient to be the fundamental subjects of epistemic normativity, and like actions, can only be derivatively evaluated as signs of their underlying dispositions; therefore, belief-forming dispositions must be the fundamental subjects of epistemic normativity.

Putting these two facts together delivers the result that belief-forming dispositions may be both morally and epistemically evaluated. This in turn implies that Hume does not think that moral and epistemic judgments need have different fundamental subjects, as the intellectual virtues may be the fundamental subjects of both. Moreover, it is important to note that Hume's point is not merely that the fundamental subjects of moral and epistemic normativity can overlap. Rather, he makes the stronger point of rejecting distinguishing the two species of normativity on the basis of their underlying dispositions, given that even traditionally considered 'epistemic' dispositions will feature in moral judgments so long as they have morally relevant features: as they 'equally produce pleasure' and 'have... an equal tendency to procure the love and esteem of mankind', there is no reason to 'make a distinction betwixt' these qualities and traditionally considered moral virtues. In short, Hume

argues that what distinguishes the two forms of normativity are not their fundamental subjects, but rather the relevant features of their fundamental subjects – so long as a disposition has a morally relevant property, it will feature in moral judgments.

However, this means that U&A has no resources for distinguishing moral normativity from epistemic. Recall that for Hume, in making a moral or epistemic judgment, we judge a person X on the basis of her disposition Y because it has feature Z. Given that THN 1.4.7 has to offer epistemic justification for our beliefs, U&A has to argue that Z is the same for both moral and epistemic normativity. Since X (the object of evaluation) and Y (the fundamental subject of evaluation) do not differ between the two realms of normativity, it seems that U&A has no resources for adequately distinguishing moral normativity from epistemic. However, as argued earlier in this paper, Hume *does* distinguish these two forms of normativity, and so U&A lies in tension with Hume’s overall normative framework.

Is this evidence that U&A is not an accurate picture of Hume’s argument in THN 1.4.7? Or does this simply mean that Hume does subscribe to U&A, as is suggested by the significant textual evidence in U&A’s favour in THN 1.4.7, but was mistaken to do so? Without examining the plausibility of alternative interpretations of THN 1.4.7, it is impossible to say. What is clear from this paper, at the very least, is that U&A is a deeply problematic interpretation of Hume, whether this is Hume’s fault or otherwise.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ An overwhelming debt of gratitude is owed to Don Garrett, whose careful comments on multiple drafts of this paper were tremendously useful and agreeable, and to Karl Schafer, for excellent comments and discussions. I am also very grateful to Peter Millican and Axel Gelfert for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. Thanks are also owed to Amyas Merivale, Lisa Downing, Cian Dorr, Martín Abreu Zavaleta, Ian Grubb, Erica Shumener, Zee Perry, Max Barkhausen, Camil Golub, and Asya Passinsky for helpful discussion. For excellent questions and comments, I am also indebted to an audience at the South Central Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, held at Texas A&M. Thanks also to Alex Worsnip for help with the title of this paper.

References

- Ardal, Pall, 1976. "Some Implications of the Virtue of Reasonableness in Hume's Treatise", in Livingston, Donald, and King, James (eds.), *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, Fordham University Press.
- Broughton, Janet, 2004. "The Inquiry in the *Treatise*," *The Philosophical Review* 113:4.
- Durland, Karánn, 2011. "Extreme Skepticism and Commitment in the *Treatise*", *Hume Studies* 37:1.
- Garrett, Don. 1997. *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, Don, 1998. "Ideas, Reasons, and Scepticism: Response to my Critics", *Hume Studies* 24.
- Garrett, Don, 2005. "Hume's Conclusions in 'Conclusion of this Book'", in Traiger, Saul (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, Blackwell Publishing.
- Gelfert, Axel. Forthcoming. "Hume on Curiosity", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.
- Hume, David, 1739-1740. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Hume, David, 1748. *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Hume, David, 1777. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, revised edition edited by E. Miller, Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- Kail, Peter, 2005. "Hume's Ethical Conclusion", in Frasca-Spada, Marina, and Kail, Peter (eds.), *Impressions of Hume*, Oxford University Press.
- Loeb, Louis E, 2002. *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise*, Oxford University Press.
- Marusic, Jennifer S, 2010. "Does Hume Hold a Dispositional Account of Belief?", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 40:2.
- McCormick, Miriam, 2005. "Why Should We Be Wise?", *Hume Studies* Vol. 31: 1.

- Millican, Peter. 2002. "Hume's Sceptical Doubts concerning Induction", in Millican, Peter (ed.), *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Owen, David, 1999. *Hume's Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Qu, Hsueh, Forthcoming. "Hume's Positive Argument on Induction", *Nous*.
- Qu, Hsueh, 2013. "Hume's Doxastic Involuntarism", unpublished manuscript.
- Ridge, Michael, 2003. "Epistemology Moralized: David Hume's Practical Epistemology", *Hume Studies* Vol. 29:2.
- Schafer, Karl, Forthcoming. "Curious Virtues in Hume's Epistemology", *Philosophers' Imprint*.
- Winkler, Kenneth, 1999. "Hume's Inductive Scepticism", in Atherton, Margaret (ed.), *The Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley, and Hume*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.