

Prescription, Description, and Hume's Experimental Method

1. Naturalism and Normativity; Prescription and Description

There seems a potential tension between Hume's naturalistic project and his normative ambitions. Hume adopts what I call a *methodological naturalism*: that is, the methodology of providing explanations for various phenomena based on natural properties and causes.¹ This methodology takes the form of introducing 'the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects', as stated in the subtitle of the *Treatise*; this 'experimental method' seems a paradigmatically *descriptive* one, and it remains unclear how Hume derives normative prescriptions from this methodology.^{2,3} The descriptive aspect of Hume's methodology is emphasised by various passages. In EPM App 4.21, Hume seems to describe himself not as a 'moralist', issuing moral prescriptions to the unenlightened; but as a 'speculative philosopher', providing a descriptive theory of our moral evaluations.⁴ Similarly, at the start of the second

¹ Hume does note the ambiguity of the term 'nature' in THN 3.1.2.7-10; I take the sense of 'nature' relevant to his naturalism to be as 'opposed to miracles' (THN 3.1.2.7); that is, Hume seeks to provide explanations for various phenomena based on properties and causes continuous with the kinds of explanations previously given for the various ways in which our world is.

² This tension is independent from the often discussed tension originally raised by Kemp Smith (1941) between Hume's naturalism and his scepticism (how is Hume's positive naturalistic project possible in the face of his scepticism?). See my <self-reference omitted> for an examination of an attempted resolution to this problem.

³ Another reason for thinking Hume's project to abstain from normative matters is Hume's identification with the anatomist rather than the painter (THN 3.3.6.6, EHU 1.8); the thought (advocated by Darwall 1994, for example) is that the anatomist is concerned with a purely descriptive project, and the painter a normative one. Here I follow Shaver (1995) and Cohon (2008) in rejecting this conception; the distinction between the two is instead analogous to the distinction between the engineer and the advertiser (Cohon 2008). In the case of normativity, the normative engineer explains the workings of normativity, while the normative advertiser exhorts us to buy it; the normative engineer's enterprise is nevertheless a wholly normative one.

⁴ In the references to Hume's texts throughout, 'THN' refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, 'A' to the *Abstract of a Book Lately Published*, 'EPM' to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 'EHU' to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 'EMPL' to *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, and 'DNR' to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and 'HL' to *The Letters of David Hume*. Arabic numerals refer to section and paragraph numbers (EPM and EHU); book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN); or to paragraph numbers (A). EMPL numbers refer to pages in the Miller revised edition of the *Essays* (Liberty Fund Inc., 1985), and DNR numbers to pages in the Kemp Smith edition of the *Dialogues* (Bobbs-Merill Educational Publishing, 1947). HL Roman numerals refer to volume, and Arabic numerals to page numbers in the Greig edition of the *Letters* (OUP, 1932).

Enquiry, Hume describes his project of discovering the origin of morals as consisting in empirical analysis:

...we shall endeavour to follow a very simple method: We shall analyze that complication of mental qualities, which form what, in common life, we call *Personal Merit*: We shall consider every attribute of the mind, which renders a man an object either of esteem and affection, or of hatred and contempt... The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other, and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived. (EPM 1.10)

However, despite Hume's emphasis on the descriptive nature of his methodology and project, his philosophy frequently seems genuinely prescriptive. A few epistemological examples: he dismisses prejudices as 'errors' that we 'rashly form' (THN 1.3.13.7); he endorses his 'rules by which to judge of causes and effects' detailed in THN 1.3.15, claiming that we 'ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects' by means of these principles (THN 1.3.13.11); he recommends that we take philosophy rather than superstition as our guide to speculation outside the bounds of everyday life (THN 1.4.7.13); and he approves as wise those who proportion their belief to the evidence (EHU 10.4). With respect to ethics, Hume criticises the 'monkish virtues' in EPM 9.3; furthermore, Cohon (2008) points out that Hume hopes his moral theory will bring about ethical improvement (EPM 9.14), which seems a somewhat unlikely result if his account merely describes our normative evaluations. Regarding aesthetics, Hume speaks of silencing 'the bad critic' of art (EMPL 236).

The question then is this: if Hume's project is a purely descriptive one, how can it produce genuine prescriptions? Passmore, in discussing Hume's epistemological account, thinks it cannot:

At certain points in the *Treatise* Hume tries to adopt this merely descriptive attitude.... But if this were the whole story, his enterprise would be pointless. For he is *arguing against* those who accept miracles; he is exhorting the 'wise and learned', the 'judicious and knowing', to become more

sceptical. (Passmore 1980, p.174)

Michael Williams (2004, p.269-70) notes the same tension between the causal and justificative aspects of Hume's epistemology. The same viewpoint has often been repeated regarding Hume's moral theory, for instance by Santayana (1905-6, p.213), Konrad (1970, p.131), Penelhum (1975, p.131), Mackie (1980, p.6), Pogge (1990, p.380), and Darwall (1994, p.61). Similarly, Krook (1959) agrees that the 'empirical method' only generates descriptions rather than prescriptions, but thinks that Hume illegitimately tries to issue prescriptions (and indeed she is caustically critical regarding the prescriptions she takes Hume to issue). Indeed, Capaldi (1966), besides arguing that Hume's ethics is descriptive rather than prescriptive, also reads Hume's infamous is/ought passage as rejecting even the possibility of there being any prescriptive ethics at all.⁵ In short, it is widely thought that Hume's experimental method cannot legitimately yield prescriptions.

In what follows, I will sketch an account of how Hume derives genuinely prescriptive judgments from his experimental method, which I argue comprises a methodology of systematisation. In applying his experimental method to normative subjects, Hume systematises our normative judgments, deriving general principles of normative justification; he then reflexively applies these principles to the pre-philosophical judgments from which they derive, dismissing and/or correcting those that do not accord with his systematised account. Hume thus manages to derive prescriptions from his experimental method; furthermore, he does so in a way that gives his prescriptions dialectical force, insofar as people will be inclined to accept them, as Hume's prescriptions are simply those that would be accepted by their more reflective selves.⁶

⁵ Indeed, the rationale for taking the prescriptive elements of Hume's philosophy to be in tension with the descriptive is not typically spelt out, but what underlies the worry seems as though it would have to do with the infamous is/ought distinction (THN 3.1.1.27). I lack the space to discuss this matter in great detail, but see my <self-reference omitted> for more discussion (and for criticism of Capaldi's position).

⁶ By this I simply mean a self that would have thought through the issues more carefully. The verdicts of our more reflective selves have a tendency to be approved of by others, although this is not an exceptionless rule.

2. The Experimental Method

Hume's 'experimental method' consists of a systematisation of empirical data. This methodology of systematisation consists of the following stages. First is the taxonomic process of sorting and classifying a variety of observations; second, the derivation of general principles from these observations; third, the selection of suitable general principles on the basis of their theoretical merits.⁷ Together, these processes constitute the kind of systematisation that Hume sees his philosophy as embodying. He notes that philosophy is simply this process of systematising our experience and reflections: 'philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected' (EHU 12.25). Schliesser (2007) argues that what Hume means by 'experiment' is something like systematic observations of our daily experience; correspondingly, Hume's experimental method would simply be a systematisation of this experience. Demeter (2012, p.580) also emphasises the importance of systematisation to Hume's method: 'Observation of human life is thus the point where inquiry and common life turn out to be continuous, the only difference being that the former is reflective, systematic and theory oriented whereas the other is unreflective, sporadic and practice-oriented.' Again, Hume sees this project as one of creating a 'system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security' (THN Intro 6):

Regarding the taxonomic process, Hume notes that 'it becomes, therefore, no inconsiderable part of science barely to know the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflection and enquiry'; this 'mental geography' is valuable in itself, even if 'we can go no farther' (EHU 1.13). He also emphasises the role of the taxonomic process in the *Abstract*: '[The author of the *Treatise*] proposes to anatomize human nature in a regular manner, and promises to draw no conclusions

⁷ Despite the taxonomic element, I see Hume's methodology as having more of an association with scientific methods than with natural history. This association with the scientific method comes up in Hume's introduction to the *Treatise*, as well as his description of it as 'An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects'. This will become more apparent in my subsequent description of this experimental method.

but where he is authorized by experience' (A 2). This anatomy of human nature seems to correspond to the 'mental geography' Hume discusses in the *Enquiry*: both have strong connotations of mapping out our psychological faculties.

However, this is not the extent of Hume's project; he hopes 'that philosophy, if cultivated with care, and encouraged by the attention of the public, may carry its researches still farther, and discover, at least in some degree, the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations' (EHU 1.15). Indeed, EHU 1.13–1.15 indicates that Hume sees this process of deriving general principles as following naturally from the taxonomic process. Once we have delineated the faculties of the mind, we are equipped to make generalisations that cut across these lines, ensuring that our general principles are at least roughly in the right ball park. The derivation of general principles is also emphasised in the *Abstract*:

If, in examining several phaenomena, we find that they resolve themselves into one common principle, and can trace this principle into another, we shall at last arrive at those few simple principles, on which all the rest depend. (A 1)

This second step of deriving general principles from a multitude of observations seems to be crucial to Hume's philosophy.⁸ In the introduction to the *Treatise*, he notes that 'we must endeavour to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes' (THN Intro 8). See also Hume's identification with the 'abstruse philosophers':

... proceeding from particular instances to general principles, [the abstruse philosophers] still push on their enquiries to principles more general, and rest not satisfied till they arrive at those original principles, by which, in every science, all human curiosity must be bounded. (EHU 1.2)

⁸ This project of deriving general rules is perfectly consistent with Hume's striving for *experimenta crucis*, or crucial experiments. Crucial experiments point the right way to general principles; they lead us on the path to better general principles, and allow us to rule out inadequate ones. Demeter (2012) both emphasises Hume's reliance on *experimenta crucis* (p.582) and the derivation of general rules (p.586), and sees them as going hand in glove.

Similarly: ‘the utmost effort of human reason is, to reduce the principles, productive of natural phaenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation’ (EHU 4.12). Again, in the second *Enquiry* he describes this experimental method as consisting in ‘deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances’ (EPM 1.10). Hume also emphasises generalisation when he speaks of extending general rules beyond the principles from which they first arise (cf. EPM 4.7 and THN 3.2.9.3).⁹

Of course, the derivation of general principles is useless without some criteria with which to choose between competing systems and principles. A given set of data or intuitions may generate many competing sets of general principles, and we need some way to compare and choose between different theories. What criteria does Hume use? Explicitly, he points to his rules by which to judge of causes and effects (THN 1.3.15). Examine his fourth rule, for instance, which he explicitly describes as guiding philosophical reasoning:

The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause. This principle we derive from experience, and is the source of most of our philosophical reasonings. (THN 1.3.15.6)

However, these rules are quite crude and limited in their application. Certainly different causes can produce the same effect, for example – fire can be caused both by a match and lightning.¹⁰ There is another, perhaps more theoretically satisfying set of criteria present in Hume’s philosophy, that is, the criteria of the theoretical merits. I argue that Hume endorses three theoretical merits in his philosophy: empirical confirmation, explanatory power, and

⁹ Hume’s emphasis on this process of reducing to more and more general principles is noted by Hazony (2014, p.162). Similarly, Demeter (2012, pp.586-7) see Hume’s experimental method as consisting in a ‘kind of analysis and synthesis’ much akin to Newton’s: we derive general principles from particular phenomena (analysis), using these principles to then explain phenomena (synthesis). The relationship between Hume’s method and Newtonian analysis and synthesis is echoed by Hazony (2014, p.164), although Hazony reads Hume as modelling himself more on Boyle than Newton.

¹⁰ Perhaps this rule could be defended by claiming that fire’s *ultimate* cause is the same in both cases (viz. heat and combustible material).

simplicity.¹¹ Empirical confirmation is the degree to which a theory is supported by the observed evidence,¹² and explanatory power is how much the theory explains. A theory is simpler than another if it postulates fewer things (ontological simplicity), or if its basic principles are fewer and/or more concise (syntactical simplicity). The idea is that theories which exhibit the best balance of these three theoretical merits are the ones that we should accept.

Hume emphasises the importance of empirical confirmation in pointing out that systems that begin from general principles commonly lead to ‘illusion and mistake’ (EPM 1.10) because they tempt one into ignoring empirical evidence; he recommends that we ‘hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience... and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation’ (*ibid.*). He also derides the work of ‘the most eminent philosophers’ for lacking empirical evidence:

Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduced from them, want of coherence in the parts, and *of evidence in the whole*, these are every where to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seem to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself. (THN Intro 1, emphasis added)

Similarly, he criticises ‘the moral philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity’ for ‘being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience’ (HL i.16). Hume thunders: ‘none but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience’ (EHU

¹¹ This is akin to Goodman (1961), who recommends safety, strength, and simplicity as theoretical merits. Plausibly, Hume’s ‘rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ embody the theoretical merits as applied to causal principles: these rules are specific applications of the more general theoretical framework of the theoretical merits. The 4th, 5th, and 6th rules in particular seem to prioritise the simplicity of causal judgments, both ontological (in not postulating more types and tokens of causes than is required) and syntactical (in not postulating more complex interactions between causes and effects than is strictly necessary). Viewed this way, the ‘rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ would be derivative on the theoretical merits.

¹² I include intuitions (roughly, pre-philosophical judgments that are accorded some degree of antecedent credence) under ‘observed evidence’, given that some of Hume’s data will source from these intuitions, particularly in the normative case.

4.20); in contrast, he describes himself as promising to ‘draw no conclusions but where he is authorized by experience’ (A 2).¹³

Hume also emphasises the importance of explanatory power. He argues that the stronger our reason and the more experience we acquire, the more we render our principles ‘more general and comprehensive’ (and therefore more explanatory powerful), noting that philosophy is simply ‘a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind’ (DNR 134). Hume approves of the abstruse philosophers’ quest for the most general principles possible (EHU 1.2); he also endeavours ‘to render all our principles as universal as possible (THN Intro 8). In other words, our principles should be wide in their scope; theories that predict only narrowly (and thus explain less than they should) are, *ceteris paribus*, poorer theories.

Of the three theoretical merits, Hume says the most about simplicity. He argues that we should seek principles that explain ‘all effects from the simplest and fewest causes’ (THN Intro 8); he points out that ‘principles... are commonly but few and simple’, and criticises one who postulates different explanations to explain every different operation as an ‘unskilful naturalist’ (THN 2.1.3.6). Hume also emphasises that we ‘ought not to multiply causes without necessity’ (THN 3.3.1.10). In similar vein, Hume also claims that the wanton postulation of new principles indicates the falsehood of a theory:

The antients... contriv’d such intricate systems of the heavens, as seem’d inconsistent with true philosophy, and gave place at last to something more simple and natural. To invent without scruple a new principle to every new phaenomenon, instead of adapting it to the old; to overload our hypotheses with a variety of this kind; are certain proofs, that none of these principles is the just one, and that we only desire, by a number of falsehoods, to cover our ignorance of the truth. (THN

¹³ This emphasis on experience is noted by Boehm (2013, p.16): ‘Hume considers experience to be the ultimate source of authority, and it is this reverence for experience that inspires Hume’s foundational ambition.’ Schliesser (2007; 2009, p.192) echoes that Hume holds the authority of experience dear, although he notes differences between Hume and Newton in the details of this reliance on experience.

2.1.3.7)

Such a subtlety is a clear proof of the falshood, as the contrary simplicity of the truth, of any system.

(THN 1.3.16.3)

Hume also puts on a pedestal the simplification of our principles:

...the utmost effort of human reason is, to reduce the principles, productive of natural phaenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation. (EHU 4.12)

Thus, it is no surprise that Hume describes the ‘simplicity’ of his system as its ‘principal force and beauty’ (THN 2.2.6.2).¹⁴

Hume reliance on these theoretical merits is not an anachronism. Hazony (2014) presents a convincing case that Hume models himself on Boyle in emphasising the reduction and resolution of terms and principles. Hazony (2014, p.150) points out that Boyle believes that the ‘excellence’ of scientific theories are based upon the qualities of simplicity and generality (which corresponds to something like what I call explanatory power in this paper); in short, ‘what makes a scientific theory worth attending to is that it is simpler than its competitors, and that the range of what can be explained by means of it is far greater’ (Hazony 2014, p.152). This provides a great deal of substantiation to the thought that Hume would adopt these theoretical merits as well.

In sum, Hume’s experimental method seems to boil down to: (1) the taxonomic project of ‘mental geography’ (EHU 1.13); (2) on the basis of this ‘mental geography’, the derivation

¹⁴ Of course, Hume does not take simplicity to be an *overriding* consideration, as theories can run into falsehoods when they idolise simplicity at the expense of the other theoretical merits: in dismissing the theory that humans are solely motivated by self-love, he derides ‘that love of *simplicity*, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy’ (EPM App 2.6). Hume does not mean that simplicity is a theoretical vice, only that care should be taken in pursuing it: ‘And though [moralists] have sometimes carried the matter too far, by their passion for some one general principle; it must, however, be confessed, that they are excusable in expecting to find some general principles, into which all the vices and virtues were justly to be resolved’ (EHU 1.15). In our theorising, we will need to weigh simplicity against the other theoretical merits.

of general principles from a multitude of observations and/or intuitions; (3) the selection of general principles on the basis of the three theoretical merits of empirical confirmation, explanatory power, and simplicity. It is by this means that Hume derives the principles of human nature that are his stated goals.

3. Deriving Prescriptions from the Empirical Method

Let us examine the process of systematisation as applied to normative judgments. As Hume emphasises in the moral case, his methodology consists of examining instances of normative judgments, searching for the common circumstances attending them (EPM 1.10). Hume systematises the circumstances attending our normative judgments in order to derive general principles, going from unsystematic pre-philosophical normative judgments to reflective normative judgments.

However, it will often be the case that our pre-philosophical judgments do not neatly line up with general principles; the quest for a simple, explanatorily powerful theory often results in a number of recalcitrant judgments. As Shaver (1995) argues, Hume resolves such issues through a method of reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1951). Rawls argues that the reasonableness of ethical principles is determined by the convergence of considered moral judgments, and we test these principles by holding them to specific cases. If the specific instances are stronger, we abandon the principle, but if the principle is stronger, we revise the judgments instead. Indeed, Daniels (1979) argues that Rawls' position does not collapse into a form of moral intuitionism (as Hare 1975 claims) precisely because unlike intuitionism, this methodology gives us the capacity to robustly revise considered moral intuitions.

Thus, our systematised principles are evaluated and modified partly on the basis of how well they fit our judgments, but the process of reflective equilibrium cuts both ways, and

sometimes we will modify or dismiss our initial judgments instead. If the theory in question is sufficiently simple and explanatorily powerful, then one can justifiably sacrifice some empirical confirmation to maintain it; that is to say, one may dismiss or correct the recalcitrant outliers in favour of the theory.¹⁵ This is consonant with Demeter's (2012) reading of Hume's method as consisting in a form of analysis and synthesis. As mentioned previously, we derive general principles from phenomena (analysis), using these principles to explain phenomena (synthesis). But it is not uncommon for there to be recalcitrant observations of phenomena that resist explanation by our general principles. If the principles have sufficient Boylean 'excellence' (that is, if they are sufficiently simple and explanatorily powerful), then in the process of synthesis, we are licensed to explain *away* recalcitrant phenomena within the framework of our theory. The process of reflective equilibrium is very much in line with Hume's experimental method.¹⁶

Indeed, the notion of deriving normative principles from the experimental method is certainly not alien to Hume's period: for instance, Leechman describes Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy* as engaging in a similar project in his preface to this work:

[Hutcheson] thought there was ground to hope, that from a more strict philosophical inquiry into the various natural principles or natural dispositions of mankind, in the same way that we enquire into the structure of a plant or the solar system, a more exact theory of morals may be formed...? (*A System of Moral Philosophy*, I, xiv-xv).

There are two things to note about such a reading of Hume's normative philosophy. First, the re-evaluation of judgments within the framework of a more general theory indicates

¹⁵ In my <self-reference omitted>, I argue that Hume does something like this in postulating the calm passions when defending his conativist thesis from putative counterexamples, dismissing our initial intuition that there are no passions present in certain cases of motivation in order to preserve the simplicity and explanatory power of his theory (THN 2.3.3.8).

¹⁶ Shaver (1995, p.322-3) puts the point succinctly: '... an instance can be discarded once the rules [for recognizing virtues and vices] are derived...'. Here I hope to more deeply develop this line of thought, explaining in more detail the theoretical framework that Hume employs in his systematisation; I also pursue its application to Hume's normative philosophy more generally, rather than focusing on the moral case as Shaver does.

an intimate relation between reflexivity and normativity.¹⁷ Hume is able to issue normative prescriptions due to the application of his systematised principles to the judgments from which they are derived (that is, through synthesis). These judgments are reflexively applied to themselves via the medium of general principles: we derive general principles from our judgments, and then apply these principles to the initial judgments. We are ultimately evaluating our normative judgments by their own standards. We certainly find a theme of reflexivity in Hume's moral account:

But this [moral] sense must certainly acquire new force, *when reflecting on itself*, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv'd... (THN 3.3.6.3, emphasis added)

Shortly after, Hume speaks of a mind being 'able to bear its own survey' (THN 3.3.6.6). In the second *Enquiry*, Hume says:

This constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all our sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for themselves as well as others; which is the surest guardian of every virtue. (EPM 9.10)

And in a letter to Hutcheson, Hume objects to Hutcheson's and Butler's view that the moral sense derives authority from our thinking that it ought to prevail, replying that the moral sense is 'nothing but an Instinct or Principle, which approves of itself upon reflection; and that is common to all of them' (HL i.47).

The second important feature of this approach is that it gives Hume's normative prescriptions strong dialectical force. By systematising our normative judgements (as opposed to simply expressing or describing his own normative judgments), Hume's prescriptions are derived from our own normative inclinations. To argue against Hume's prescriptions would be to succumb to inconsistency, as he is merely presenting to us the normative judgments of our more reflective selves. We thus feel a real pressure to take Hume's prescriptions on board, or

¹⁷ This connection between reflexivity and normativity is emphasised by Baier (1991) and Korsgaard (1996), although they give it a much more prominent role than I do: as Baier describes her position, 'Successful reflexivity is normativity' (pp.99-100).

be judged unworthy by our own standards. Therefore Hume is entitled to prescriptions with dialectical force through his experimental method, despite refraining from appealing to strongly mind-independent normative facts.¹⁸

4. Textual Confirmation

This interpretation is substantiated by the three normative loci of Hume's philosophy: first, in his account of morality, particularly the derivation of usefulness and agreeableness as the defining properties of the virtues; second, in his account of aesthetics, specifically the derivation of 'rules of composition' in 'Of a Standard of Taste'; and third, in his account of epistemology, most prominently in his rules by which to judge of causes and effects.¹⁹

(a) Morality

In his autobiographical 'My Own Life', Hume describes his second *Enquiry* as 'of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best'. The correctness of this statement is often questioned, as is Hume's rationale for making the statement. After all, the second *Enquiry* is nowhere near as ingenious, novel, or subtle as the *Treatise* or the first *Enquiry*. What criteria might Hume be using in making this comparative judgment? Garrett (2015, p.24) offers three possible reasons: partly its methodology, partly its writing style, but mainly its practical value. It seems unlikely that considerations of writing style play a huge role in this opinion of Hume's, given that the second *Enquiry*, while clear and well-written, is not nearly as literarily impressive as his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, nor is it so much

¹⁸ For Hume, normative facts are weakly mind-independent in that they could exist independently of any individual mind, although not minds in general, which strong mind-independence would entail.

¹⁹ Note that there is no need for all of Hume's normative pronouncements to fit this mould; all that is required is that some core basis of normative principles is derived via the experimental method. Once this is allowed, descriptive claims can unproblematically license further normative principles on the basis of the core normative principles. For instance, the following inference seems unproblematic, despite premise 2 being descriptive:

1. People who deliberately cause unnecessary pain are vicious.
2. John deliberately causes unnecessary pain.
3. Therefore John is vicious.

(if any) more well-written than, say, the *Treatise*. It also seems unlikely that considerations of practical role would ‘incomparably’ favour the second *Enquiry*: the *Treatise* (THN 1.4.7), first *Enquiry* (Sections 10 and 11), and the *Dialogues* all dismiss superstition; and Hume certainly thought errors in religion to be ‘dangerous’ (THN 1.4.7.13); moreover, the *Treatise* contains a substantial treatment of ethics. I believe that the reason for Hume’s admiration for the second *Enquiry* is largely its methodology: of all his works, it best exemplifies his experimental method in systematising observations and deriving general principles.²⁰

In the second *Enquiry*, Hume emphasises the role that systematisation plays in his account.²¹ As noted in Section 3, the process of systematisation begins early on with the correction of sentiments by means of imaginative sympathy, which produces a set of considered (because corrected) but yet pre-philosophical moral judgments founded on a common point of view. Enter Hume, the scientist of human nature. He has as his data the empirical observations of our pre-philosophical moral judgments, such as attributions of virtue and vice. From his examination of this data, Hume systematises our moral judgments to discern the common features that these moral judgments are responsive towards, emphasising that this project is driven by his experimental method:

The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these [estimable or blamable] qualities [of men]... *As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general*

²⁰ For a rich treatment of the issue, see Baier (2008), who points to various factors that might have contributed to Hume’s fondness for the second *Enquiry*, including its being an ‘anti-Christian manifesto’, its making ‘several substantive adjustments to *Treatise* 3’s version of moral good and evil’, and its ‘literary... finesse’ (p.315). As Baier concedes, Hume’s ‘Natural history of religion’ surpasses the second *Enquiry* with respect to being an ‘anti-Christian manifesto’ (p.315). As for literary finesse, I think the *Dialogues* outdoes it on this score, as noted above. Of course, perhaps Hume favours the second *Enquiry* because of a combination of factors, but I maintain that considerations of methodology should be prominent in any such mixture.

²¹ I think a similar process of systematisation to the one I describe below also occurs in Hume’s treatment of virtue and vice in THN 3.2.24-31. For instance, the following certainly seems to echo EPM 1.10 (which I address shortly) in its methodology: ‘Tis very happy, in our philosophical researches, when we find the same phaenomenon diversified by a variety of circumstances; and by discovering what is common among them, can the better assure ourselves of the truth of any hypothesis we may make use of to explain that phaenomenon’ (THN 3.3.1.25). Nevertheless, I focus my attention on the second *Enquiry*, because I believe that it has a much stronger emphasis on systematisation than Book 3, which is why I believe Hume thought so highly of it. Hence, the two works differ at least with regard to their emphasis. The exact extent to which they differ is not a topic I have space to address in this paper.

maxims from a comparison of particular instances. (EPM 1.10, italics added)

Hume rejects the idea that the key normative features that our moral judgments track could be anything less than universal, and searches for a strong (because universal) and simple (because reduced to a minimal number of features) theory of morality. The emphasis on explanatory power can be seen from Hume's dismissal of certain passions as the foundation of morality, because they are not comprehensive enough to play this role:

The other passions produce, in every breast, many strong sentiments of desire and aversion, affection and hatred; but these neither are felt so much in common, nor are so comprehensive, as to be the foundation of any general system and established theory of blame or approbation. (EPM 9.5)

From the systematisation of his empirical data (that is, his observation of our moral judgments), Hume discovers that the key features of which our moral sentiments approve are usefulness and agreeableness (EPM 9.1). Having found usefulness and agreeableness to be the defining features of virtues, Hume now reflexively applies this result to our pre-philosophical moral judgments, dismissing those that contradict this result. Unsurprisingly, many of our pre-philosophical judgments accord with it, as Hume notes in EPM 9.12 – the principle is, after all, derived from these same judgments! However, not all of our pre-philosophical judgments are quite so fortunate:

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose... We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. (EPM 9.3)

Hume takes issue with what he calls the 'monkish virtues', which in his time were indeed commonly taken to be virtues. Indeed, some traits such as humility are still taken to be virtues today. However, armed with his systematised definition of virtue, Hume can now attack as

vices the monkish virtues.²² Hume says that ‘we justly, therefore, transfer’ the monkish virtues to ‘the catalogue of vices’ on the basis that they are actively disagreeable and harmful to the person and to others. It seems that Hume thinks the monkish virtues are pre-theoretically treated as virtues; hence why a ‘transfer’ to the catalogue of vices is necessary.²³

Hume maintains that we pre-philosophically recognise the correctness of his conclusion that usefulness and agreeableness are the defining features of virtue:

But however the case may have fared with philosophy; in common life, these principles are still implicitly maintained, nor is any other topic of praise and blame ever recurred to, when we employ any panegyric or satire, any applause or censure of human action and behaviour. If we observe men, in every intercourse of business or pleasure, in every discourse and conversation; we shall find them no where, except in the schools, at any loss upon the subject. (EPM 9.2)

This pre-philosophical awareness is only to be expected, given that Hume’s result is derived from our own moral judgments, and this recognition gives Hume’s prescriptions their dialectical force.

(b) Aesthetics

According to Hume, in arriving at a ‘true and decisive standard’ of aesthetic sentiments we systematise observations about what is found to be aesthetically pleasing, deriving ‘rules of composition’ to guide our aesthetic judgments:

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasoning *a priori*... Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they any thing but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and all ages.

²² Admittedly, this might not be a purely theoretical correction, since the transfer is at least partially the result of our ‘natural sentiments’, which are not ‘entirely’ perverted. Nevertheless, it seems clear that theoretical considerations can and do play a role in pushing us one way or another, especially when our sentiments are on the fence (because only partially perverted).

²³ Hume does note that the monkish virtues are rejected by ‘men of sense’, but such men may not be especially common.

(EMPL 231)

Hume is clear that observations of aesthetic judgments form the basis for the rules of composition. We make observations about what features of artistic works generally garner aesthetic approval, systematising these observations to derive the rules of composition.

The resulting system, formed by the process of comparison and systematisation, provides a standard by which to make aesthetic judgments:

...they must acknowledge a *true and decisive standard* to exist somewhere... (EMPL 242, emphasis added)

By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise and blame, and learn how to assign the due degrees of each. (EMPL 238)

This standard provides a normative ground for our aesthetic judgments, allowing them to be more than mere expressions of our personal sentiments, as Galgut (2012, p.194) notes.

Hume also points out that this system will result in errant aesthetic judgments that contradict these general principles:

But though all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules. (EMPL 232)

This resulting system can then be used to judge these outliers:

It is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, forming one sentiment and condemning another. (EMPL 229)

And criticisms issued on the basis of these rules of composition have real dialectical force, as they find echo in our personal aesthetic judgments:

...to silence the bad critic... we show him an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate the principle by examples, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable

to the principle; when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive or feel his influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse. (EMPL 236)

Admittedly, Hume does not here provide the details of these rules of composition, but merely describes the process of deriving them; as Galgut (2012, p.194) points out: ‘Hume is less concerned with identifying which and whose particular aesthetic judgments are correct... than with presenting us with a *justification* of the practice that takes some works to be better than others’.²⁴ Hume does, however, specify the traits of a true critic (i.e. ‘Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’ [EMPL 241]), and ‘the joint verdict of such [true critics], wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty’ (EMPL 241). All in all, Hume thinks the process of systematisation is able to engender genuine aesthetic prescriptions.²⁵

(c) Epistemology

Hume’s epistemological account follows much the same route as the previous two normative discussions. He begins with his observations of our pre-philosophical judgments regarding justified and unjustified beliefs, systematising them and deriving general principles; he then reflexively applies these principles to the initial pre-philosophical judgments from which they derive, dismissing outliers to his theory.

Hume’s rules by which to judge of causes and effects (THN 1.3.15) most clearly exemplifies Hume’s methodology of normative systematisation.²⁶ Here, he examines instances

²⁴ Whether this justification is ‘internal’ or ‘external’ is an open question. I say more on this issue in Section 5.

²⁵ Cohen (1958) also argues that ‘Of a Standard of Taste’ draws on Hume’s experimental method, although Cohen in this paper seems to take Hume’s experimental method in a very broad sense as ‘a method based on fact and observation’ (p.288).

²⁶ Of course, this is not the only instance of Hume’s issuing epistemic prescriptions. Hume frequently makes epistemic pronouncement in a rather piecemeal fashion, for example in his exhortation to proportion belief to the evidence (EHU 10.4), among many others. I believe similar processes of systematisation are behind some of these

of causal inferences that we pre-philosophically approve of as correct, distilling them to more general principles to regulate causal inferences:

We shall afterwards take notice of some general rules, by which we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects; and these rules are form'd on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgments we form concerning objects. (THN 1.3.13.11).

Hume then reflexively applies these rules to the pre-philosophical judgments from which they derive. This systematised standard allows us to criticise weak inductive inferences that we might unreflectively think acceptable. Indeed, Hume notes that it is only by following these general rules that we are able to correct unphilosophical probabilities:

The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet 'tis only by following them that we can correct this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities. (THN 1.3.13.12)

As in the case of Hume's derivation of usefulness and agreeableness, he points out that we implicitly recognise these rules as the foundation of our normative assessments of causal inferences:

Here is all the LOGIC I think proper to employ in my reasoning; and perhaps even this was not very necessary, but *might have been supply'd by the natural principles of the understanding*. Our scholastic head-pieces and logicians *show no such superiority* above the mere vulgar in their reason and ability, as to give us any inclination to imitate them in delivering a long system of rules and precepts to direct our judgment, in philosophy. *All the rules of this nature are very easy in their invention...* (THN 1.3.15.10, emphasis added)

Clearly Hume sees himself as explicitly stating what we already know at some level; again, this provides his prescriptions with dialectical force, as they find echo in our pre-philosophical recognition of these rules.

pronouncements, but I focus on Hume's rules by which to judge of causes and effects here, because it most explicitly highlights this process.

To sum up, Hume clearly uses his experimental method of systematisation to derive general normative principles capable of correcting our pre-philosophical normative judgments, and these principles possess dialectical force due to our pre-philosophical recognition of their correctness. This is consistent throughout the different normative accounts Hume gives, whether moral, epistemic, or aesthetic.²⁷

5. Hume's Scepticism in THN 1.4.7

It is difficult to engage with Hume's epistemology without at least a cursory glance towards Hume's notoriously fraught encounter with scepticism in THN 1.4.7. I have written more about Hume's scepticism elsewhere,²⁸ and I lack the space in this paper to adequately engage with such a deep and complex issue here, but I hope to briefly say something about how the scepticism of THN 1.4.7 might bear on the interpretation I defend in this paper.²⁹

By the end of Part 3 of Book 1, Hume seems to have derived epistemic principles that reflexively justify his causal claims up to this point; insofar as this is true, Hume has engaged in a project of successful systematisation. However, a question that might – and does – arise for him is this: why think that following these rules allow one to arrive at how things *really* are? Might they not merely reflect our practices? How do we know if they really allow for us to attain Truth, with a capital T?

²⁷ An anonymous referee notes that although Hume's methodology seems to be similar in the three cases of ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics, the products are very different: the identification of the morally relevant traits in ethics, the rules by which to judge of cause and effect in epistemology, and the verdicts of the true judges in aesthetics. I lack sufficient space to fully explain this, but speculatively, I think the three cases are not too different, in that all three cases identify normatively relevant dispositions. Useful and agreeable traits are character dispositions. Meanwhile, rules by which to judge of causes and effects might be thought to embody doxastic dispositions as well – an epistemically responsible agent would simply be one who had doxastic dispositions in line with these rules. This is especially plausible due to Hume's doxastic involuntarism (c.f. THN App.2; A 20-21; EHU 5.10-11) – given that we cannot deliberately decide what to believe, it seems that these rules are meant by Hume to express implicit dispositions of the wise, rather than explicit procedures. Indeed, THN 1.3.15.10 also suggests that these rules are somewhat implicit in nature. Similarly, in the aesthetic case the verdicts of true judges simply express particular dispositions of true judges (i.e. those with 'aesthetically good' dispositions) towards art and beauty.

²⁸ See my <self-reference omitted>, <self-reference omitted>, and <self-reference omitted>.

²⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising the issues I engage with in this section, as well as suggesting the resolution to them.

Hume seems to raise exactly this issue at the start of THN 1.4.7:

Can I be sure, that in leaving all establish'd opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune shou'd at last guide me on her foot-steps? 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. 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. 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. 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. (THN 1.4.7.3)

Here Hume expresses the worry that our beliefs are merely founded on vivacity, which does not obviously seem truth-conducive. Although the rules he sets out in THN 1.3.15 seem to do a good job of codifying our causal reasoning, this does not seem sufficient to guarantee truth. In what sense, then, has Hume successfully arrived at epistemic principles through his experimental method?

For the purposes of this paper, I will remain agnostic about the extent of Hume's scepticism in THN 1.4.7. Nevertheless, I think my interpretation can accommodate even strongly sceptical interpretations. Let us distinguish between 'internal' and 'external' justification: internal justification pertains to justification according to the framework of our practices (e.g. using the right kind of fork for salad), and external justification pertains to

justification according to some objective standard (such as truth). If Hume is strongly sceptical about the prospects of deriving truth through means of causal reasoning, then this clearly precludes external justification; we have no prospects of justifying causal reasoning according to the objective standard of truth. Nevertheless, such a strongly sceptical reading still allows for our causal reasoning to be internally justified. Our causal reasoning is internally justified if it accords with the rules by which to judge of causes and effects that codify and systematise our causal practices; to this extent, Hume has engaged in a process of successful systematisation in the epistemic case. Of course, if Hume turns out to be less sceptical than this, then there are prospects for not just the internal but also external justification of our doxastic practices; perhaps the epistemic principles he derives can be justified in virtue of the fact that they get at truth. Either way, it seems plausible that Hume has successfully derived correct epistemic principles by means of his method of systematisation – the only question that remains is whether these principles are ‘internally’ correct (because they are a successful codification of our causal practices), or ‘externally’ correct (because they are genuinely truth-conducive).³⁰

6. The Theoretical Merits as a Normative Starting Point

I have argued that the experimental method of systematisation relies on a set of criteria for determining good systems from bad ones, and these criteria proved crucial in allowing Hume to derive prescriptions. Clearly, these criteria are normative criteria; they discern better theories from worse. Moreover, these criteria are irreducible in a sense. They cannot be themselves derived from non-normative observation, for such a derivation would presuppose some process of systematisation; any derivation of general principles for theory-building from observations of past theoretical endeavours would itself depend on using a set of theoretical criteria to

³⁰ An anonymous referee raises the question of why Hume raises this issue with respect to epistemology, but not ethics or aesthetics. I do not have a complete answer, but I do think one reason might be that the issue is so much starker with respect to epistemology. If Hume’s epistemology is suspect and he cannot trust that his causal reasoning is able to derive true principles, then any subsequent principles that he derives in ethics and aesthetics seem compromised from the start. This centrality of the epistemic case might be why Hume raises the issue with respect to epistemology in particular.

distinguish good resulting principles from bad. But we can now ask how we derived this further set of theoretical criteria, and a regress quickly threatens. The point is that our enquiries can only get off the ground by presuming a set of theoretical criteria.³¹

Indeed, attempting to theorise about the world without presuming any theoretical criteria whatsoever would doom our intellectual endeavours from the start, as we would be left unable to proceed with our philosophical enquiries without a way to choose between a multitude of competing systems. To question our methodology would be epistemological suicide, as we would be left without any tools with which to dig ourselves out of the resulting sceptical hole. This would be akin to the antecedent scepticism that Hume decries in EHU 12.3. Rather than succumb to such inescapable antecedent scepticism, we should at the very least begin by assuming the correctness of our faculties, only questioning them if we find them to be fallacious or deceitful, in line with consequent scepticism (EHU 12.5).³² Although Hume does not discuss the analogous issue with respect to the normativity involved in theory choice, we can offer a parallel reply on his behalf: we should similarly begin our theoretical endeavours by assuming the justification of a set of theoretical merits, or we shall never begin at all.³³ Of course, like the faculties, the theoretical merits possess only defeasible justification: we might begin with a set of theoretical criteria and find that the corresponding principles we derive to be fallacious, and therefore revise these criteria accordingly. Luckily, something like the theoretical merits espoused by Hume seems to get things right, and we can safely adopt simplicity, explanatory power, and empirical confirmation as theoretical merits.

³¹ Hume does take his ‘rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ to be based on empirical observation (THN 1.3.13.11). Arguably, these rules are derived from systematising our theoretical endeavours by means of the theoretical merits, but the theoretical merits themselves cannot be derived from observation without presupposing some theoretical criteria for the above reasons. Despite this, the theoretical merits can still be empirically substantiated: the reason we choose to persist with these theoretical merits is because we have seen that they tend to deliver good theories. The theoretical merits are *a priori* in the sense that their initial selection has to precede enquiry, but they are empirical in the sense that this initial selection is revisable based on subsequent observation.

³² I discuss Hume’s treatment of scepticism in the *Enquiry* in more depth in my <self-reference omitted>.

³³ This is most likely what Hume would reply to Passmore’s (1980, p.60) question of why we should prefer regularity to irregularity: because without such regularity and systematicity we would have no way of theorising about the world.

Since these theoretical merits are normative in nature (insofar as they discern better theories from worse), we see that Hume's experimental method is not purely descriptive; it involves a normative element. Thus Hume is not attempting to derive prescription merely from description. Hume does not miraculously derive normative principles from non-normative observation; rather, his methodology itself has a normative aspect.

In similar vein to Section 5, one question that arises is regarding the degree to which the theoretical merits are normative: are they merely a method that Hume uses to attain general principles, or do they justify these principles in a stronger sense? It is typically controversial whether theoretical merits such as simplicity and explanatory power are truth-tracking. Hume makes statements that imply that he thinks simplicity at least to be indicative of the truth of a theory:

Such a subtlety is a clear proof of the falshood, as the contrary simplicity of the truth, of any system.

(THN 1.3.16.3)

To invent without scruple a new principle to every new phaenomenon, instead of adapting it to the old; to overload our hypotheses with a variety of this kind; are certain proofs, that none of these principles is the just one, and that we only desire, by a number of falsehoods, to cover our ignorance of the truth. (THN 2.1.3.7)

Nevertheless, it might be maintained that Hume only means truth in a more pragmatic sense here, rather than in some stronger realist sense. Regardless of one's feelings on the matter, my paper is consistent with both a strong realist take on the theoretical merits, and also a more pragmatic stance. Whether Hume takes the theoretical merits merely as a heuristic with no strong justificatory implications for his principles or otherwise, I hope to have shown in this paper that Hume does indeed appeal to his method of systematisation and the theoretical merits in order to derive normative principles. Thus, Hume's normative project is not in tension with, but rather flows seamlessly from, his naturalistic experimental method.

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