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Philosophy Without Title: Hume's Sceptical Principles in the Treatise

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PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT TITLE:
HUME'S SCEPTICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE *TREATISE*

by
John F. Muller

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ABSTRACT

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by

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019
Under the Supervision of Professor Miren Boehm

At the end of Book I of the *Treatise*, David Hume identifies a dilemma that has him ready to abandon philosophy. We have no choice, he suggests, between (1) a “false reason” that leads to “errors, absurdities, and obscurities,” and (2) no reason at all, a paralysis of self-doubt that ends in “total scepticism.” In the last two decades, the “Title Principle” has recast the debate around how Hume is able to continue with philosophy in the face of this dilemma. Per its proponents, the Title Principle is Hume’s “answer” to the dilemma, an articulation of the sort of reasoning we can accept in spite of it. In this paper, I contest that view and advance a novel account of how Hume addresses the dilemma. I argue that Hume does not solve the dilemma, but rather suggests that the intractability of the dilemma teaches us how to proceed when we are inclined, as Hume says most of us inevitably are, to inquire beyond common life and into the underlying nature of reality. That is, the intractability of the dilemma teaches us how to do philosophy: by employing “sceptical principles” that anticipate what Hume would later call, in the first *Enquiry*, “mitigated scepticism.”

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Introduction

In the “Conclusion” of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume sets out a “very dangerous dilemma,” one that offers him “no choice . . . betwixt a false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.7).¹ On the one hand, Hume says, our beliefs are founded not on reason but on a “seemingly trivial” feature of the imagination (T 1.4.7.7). As a result, we engage in what Hume calls false reason, which yields “errors, absurdities, and obscurities” (T 1.4.7.6). On the other hand, Hume suggests, if we reject this “seemingly trivial” feature of the imagination, our reasoning “entirely subverts itself,” descending into “total scepticism” (T 1.4.7.7).

This choice “betwixt a false reason and none at all” reduces Hume almost to despair. At one point he even “resolve[s] to perish on the barren rock” on which he sits rather than venture further “upon that boundless ocean” of philosophy (T 1.4.7.1). Still, following the Conclusion—which has been called “the most challenging fifteen paragraphs in the literature on scepticism”²—Hume does venture further: to Books II and III of the *Treatise*, and beyond.

How, then, does Hume get past this dangerous dilemma? Many scholars have argued that Hume necessarily comes to ignore it: as Robert Fogelin writes, for instance, “we do not overcome it by reflecting still more deeply, but by bringing our reflections to an end.”³ Over the last two decades, however, a family of alternative accounts has injected new life into the

¹ References to *A Treatise of Human Nature* are cited as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (Hume 2009). References to the “Conclusion,” capitalized as here, denote T 1.4.7 as a whole. (Hume’s full header for T 1.4.7 is “Conclusion of this book.”) References, below, to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are cited as “EHU” followed by section and paragraph numbers (Hume 2010).

² Schmitt 2014, 341. For a similar statement, see Qu 2014, 501 (“It is notoriously difficult to decipher Hume’s considered response to scepticism in this section, or whether he even has one.”) Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Conclusion also has been called “the most literary stretch of writing in the English-language philosophical canon.” Ainslie 2015, 218.

³ Fogelin 1985, 92. See also Popkin 1951, 394-395; Stroud 1977, 249-250; Waxman 1994, 278; Cummins 1999, 58-60; Loeb 2004, 14, 31; Fogelin 2009, 132-137.

debate.⁴ This family of accounts, inspired in large part by Don Garrett, suggests that Hume does not ignore the dilemma but rather “resolves” it, offering “a third choice.”⁵ That choice has been dubbed the “Title Principle,” named for language in T. 1.4.7.11 that discusses what sort of reasoning “never can have any title to operate upon us.”⁶

In this paper, I advance a novel account of how Hume proceeds after the dilemma. Hume does not, I argue, either resolve the dilemma or ignore it. Instead, he draws a lesson from the dilemma’s intractability. Our inability to steer clear of both false reason and no reason, Hume suggests, teaches us how to do philosophy: by employing “sceptical principles” that anticipate what Hume would later call, in the first *Enquiry*, “mitigated scepticism.” These sceptical principles help guard against—although by no means rule out—the pitfalls of two of Hume’s primary targets: superstition and traditional metaphysics.

Below, I first explicate the dangers posed by the dilemma. Next, I critique accounts that claim the Title Principle “resolves” the dilemma, placing these accounts within the broader context of other efforts to make sense of the Conclusion. Finally, I offer my account of how Hume continues with philosophy in wake of the dilemma: I argue that Hume proceeds in light of what the dilemma teaches—a particular sort of diffidence.

1. The Dangers of the Dilemma

When Hume takes stock of his philosophical journey at the start of the Conclusion, he speaks of diffidence—modesty born of a lack of self-confidence. “My memory of past errors

⁴ As Ainslie details (2015, 219), scholars “tended to ignore” the Conclusion until Baier 1991.

⁵ Garrett 2015b, 46; Garrett 2006, 169.

⁶ Don Garrett named the Title Principle in 1997 (1997, 234). He has since refined his account. See Garrett 2004, 86-87; Garrett 2006, 165-170; Garrett 2015a, 218-237; Garrett 2015b, 32-53. For similar accounts, see Allison 2005, 334-337; Allison 2008, 323-326; Kail 2007, 70; Qu 2014, 504; Qu forthcoming; Owen 1999, 217; Schafer 2014, 11-15; Schmitt 2014, 368-375.

and perplexities,” he says, “makes me diffident for the future” (T 1.4.7.1). Hume bemoans the “wretched condition, weakness, and disorder” of human cognitive faculties, and says that the “impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties” leaves him almost in despair (T 1.4.7.1). It is the intractability of these problems with our faculties that ultimately leads Hume to the “very dangerous dilemma,” a choice “betwixt a false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.7).

Given the wretched condition of our faculties, Hume says, even “[a]fter the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou’d assent to it” (T 1.4.7.3). Instead, Hume can “feel nothing but a *strong* propensity” to do so—a natural tendency rather than a reason (T 1.4.7.3). This troubling conclusion arises because of how, in Hume’s view, we form beliefs. Hume identifies belief with the “liveliness” of our ideas. That is, if an idea seizes on the mind in a sufficiently lively fashion, we believe it. The imagination is the aspect of the mind that enlivens our ideas, with lively ideas becoming beliefs.

Hume suggests that this feature of the mind—the way “the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others”—can yield beliefs that are not “founded” on reason (T 1.4.7.3). To illustrate, he points to how the imagination enlivens ideas based on “[e]xperience” and “[h]abit” (T 1.4.7.3). When we experience “several conjunctions” between smoke and fire, the imagination will enliven the idea of fire whenever we see smoke (T 1.4.7.3). Habit, meanwhile, leads us “to expect the same for the future” (T 1.4.7.3). But we cannot prove that smoke and fire are always conjoined. And neither can we prove that the future will continue to resemble the past.

Although the manner in which “the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others... seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason,” Hume suggests, it is unavoidable: without it, “we cou’d never assent to any argument” nor “comprehend” anything other than the “succession of impressions” immediately “present to our senses” (T 1.4.7.3). This is why Hume says that he “can give no reason why [he] should assent” even to “the most accurate

and exact of [his] reasonings” (T 1.4.7.3). Whenever we engage in reasoning, we inevitably rely on beliefs that cannot be demonstratively proven, but rather are founded only on tendencies of the mind. These tendencies of the mind are not based just on custom and habit, but a whole host of things. As Hume notes a few paragraphs later, superstition “seizes more strongly on the mind” than the “cold and general speculation” of philosophy (T 1.4.7.13).

It is thus “[n]o wonder,” Hume observes, that this “inconstant and fallacious” feature of the imagination—the manner in which it enlivens ideas—“shou’d lead us into errors” when it is “implicitly follow’d (as it must be) in all its variations” (T 1.4.7.4). In fact, this feature of the imagination does not merely lead us into errors, but into self-contradiction. For instance, the imagination enlivens the idea that the bodies we perceive (say, an apple in front of you on a desk) are external to the mind and independent of it for their existence (T 1.4.7.4). Yet this “natural and necessary” belief is “directly contrary” to another “equally natural and necessary” belief, which arises from probable reasoning (T 1.4.7.4). That is, earlier in Book I, in T 1.4.4, Hume reasoned that the qualities we ascribe to bodies—such as color, sound, taste, and smell—are internal to and dependent on the mind. If our senses have nothing external to perceive, Hume there suggested, then bodies must instead be internal to and dependent on the mind. Yet this creates a contradiction: the imagination has enlivened directly contrary beliefs, one that bodies are external to the mind and independent of it for their existence, and one that bodies are internal to the mind and dependent on the mind for their existence.

There is, moreover, no way to discern a foundational principle that would definitively resolve this contradiction. “Nothing is more curiously enquir’d after by the mind of man,” Hume says, than the “causes of every phaenomenon” (T 1.4.7.5). How “disappointed” we must be, then, “when we learn” that the “connexion, tie, or energy” that links causes and their effects “lies merely in ourselves” rather than in the phenomena (T 1.4.7.5). That is, because

the imagination enlivens ideas of necessary connections between causes and effects that cannot be demonstratively proven, these connections are merely a “determination of the mind” “acquir’d by custom,” not a feature of the seemingly causal phenomena themselves (T 1.4.7.5). This discovery, Hume says, “cuts off all hope” of arriving at any “ultimate and operating principle” of the external world (T 1.4.7.5) that might adjudicate among the “inconstant and fallacious” beliefs enlivened by the mind (T 1.4.7.4).

This is quite a damning state of affairs. And yet, Hume says, it is “not perceiv’d in common life” (T 1.4.7.6). The question, then, is “how far we ought to yield to the[] illusions” that obscure it (T 1.4.7.6). This question, Hume says, is “very difficult” (T 1.4.7.6). Indeed, it “reduces us to a very dangerous dilemma which-ever way we answer it” (T 1.4.7.6), one that leaves us with “no choice left betwixt a false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.7).

On one side of the dilemma there is the danger of “false reason.” We could, Hume explains, “assent to every trivial suggestion of the imagination,” which is to say we could assent to every idea that the imagination enlivens, including ideas that are not founded on reason (T 1.4.7.6). But if we do so, Hume says, we will be led “into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham’d of our credulity” (T 1.4.7.6). That is, if we accept that our reasoning is not founded on reason alone, we must also accept that we cannot trust the beliefs that arise from our reasoning: we cannot look upon any “opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (T 1.4.7.8).

On the other side of the dilemma there is the danger of “no reason.” Given the danger of false reason, we might decide to “reject the trivial suggestions” of the imagination and instead employ reason alone (T 1.4.7.7). But if we did so, Hume says, the result would be “fatal” (T 1.4.7.7). Earlier in the *Treatise*, in T 1.4.1, Hume found that reason on its own “entirely subverts itself” (T 1.4.7.7). The strictest reason calls for measures that prevent all

mistakes, but these measures turn out to be self-defeating. That is, because of the risk of a mistake, reason calls on us to check and re-check even our most rudimentary conclusions, but the risk of a mistake never fully dissipates, and so reason calls for an endless loop of checking and re-checking. What allows us to get out of this loop, Hume suggests, is the “seemingly trivial” way the imagination enlivens ideas (T 1.4.7.7). This feature of the imagination makes us “enter with difficulty into remote views of things,” such that the more we check our conclusions, the less lively our reasoning becomes about the need for further checking (T 1.4.7.7). Accordingly, the imagination makes us move on rather than sink into the “total scepticism” of an endless loop of self-doubt (T 1.4.7.7).

In the face of these choices, Hume briefly entertains a middle path, asking if we should adopt a maxim against “refin’d and elaborate reasoning” (T 1.4.7.7). This maxim would formalize the “trivial suggestion” of the imagination that averts the endless loop of self-doubt just described (T 1.4.7.7). But, Hume says, this maxim against refined and elaborate reasoning is no solution. After all, in addition to averting the endless loop of self-doubt, it would also “cut off all science and philosophy,” both of which depend on refined and elaborate reasoning (albeit not to the point of total scepticism) (T 1.4.7.7). Moreover, Hume continues, if we “proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination,” which is to say if we accept this one way in which the imagination enlivens ideas, then “by parity of reason” we “must embrace all of them,” which would plunge us back into false reason (T 1.4.7.7). What’s more, Hume argues, this maxim would “expressly contradict” itself: it would reject refined and elaborate reasoning based on arguments built on just that sort of reasoning (T 1.4.7.7).

At bottom, then, the trouble for Hume is that the way the imagination saves us from “no reason” is inseparable from the way it leads us into “false reason.” If we accept the ideas that the imagination enlivens—which will include trivial suggestions of the imagination that are

not founded on reason—then we will be led into errors, absurdities, and obscurities. But if we reject all of those trivial suggestions, we will be unable to reason at all. And we cannot, Hume says, merely accept some trivial suggestions but not all.⁷

2. The Troubles with the Title Principle

How, then, does Hume continue with philosophy? Many have suggested that Hume sees no way out of the dilemma but proceeds by distancing himself from the dilemma's troubling implications. There are two variants of this approach. The more common variant holds that Hume comes to ignore the dilemma: he arrives at an "unwillingness to take [the dangers of the dilemma] as conclusive even though they seem unanswerable," and, by the end of the Conclusion, he has "found a way to block or deactivate [his] recollection" of the dilemma so that he can "go forward with his original project."⁸ The less common variant holds that rather than ignore the dilemma, Hume detaches himself from the philosophical project that it calls into question: he "treats the resumption of scientific inquiry in a detached way, as involving convictions with which he cannot fully identify himself" and conveys his detachment from his project particularly through "the literary device of irony."⁹

In the last few decades, however, a family of alternative accounts has reoriented the discussion. These accounts attempt to give substance to what, in Norman Kemp Smith's canonical account of Hume, never becomes quite clear: how Hume's naturalism and his

⁷ Garrett reads the dilemma as one of five distinct concerns that Hume identifies at the outset of the Conclusion. See, e.g., Garrett 1997, 208-232; Garrett 2006, 149-164; Garrett 2015a 218-227. On my view, it is not one concern among several, but rather the culminating problem of Book I.

⁸ Cummins 1999, 58-60. For similar claims, see Popkin 1951, 394-95; Stroud 1977, 249-250; Fogelin 1985, 92; Waxman 1994, 278; Loeb 2004, 14, 31; and Fogelin 2009, 132-137. This view has also commonly been attributed to Hume in the general literature on problems of scepticism. See, e.g., Strawson 1985, 10-14; Williams 1996, 2-10.

⁹ This view is advanced by Broughton 2004, 550-553.

scepticism somehow might work in tandem rather than exist in tension.¹⁰ The alternative accounts in question suggest that the answer to this question is the Title Principle, which they contend offers a “resolution” to the dilemma by providing “a satisfactory principle after all for determining which reasoning to accept and which to reject.”¹¹ The Title Principle denotes two sentences Hume offers several paragraphs after he finishes articulating the dilemma. They state: “Where reason is lively, and mixes with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us” (T 1.4.7.11).

Appealingly, the Title Principle appears to suggest a way to accept *some* trivial suggestions of the imagination but not *all*. When reason is lively and mixes with a propensity—which is to say when it mixes with a passion in Hume’s sense, such as curiosity or ambition—we are to assent to it. In our assent to this sort of reason we will assent, as well, to the trivial suggestions of the imagination that enliven it. But when reason is not lively or does not mix with a passion—for instance, when we check and recheck our conclusions—reason has no title over us. Thus, under this principle we will neither reject nor accept every trivial suggestion of the imagination, but rather accept only those trivial suggestions of the imagination that enliven beliefs that are informed by reason, and more specifically beliefs that

¹⁰ Kemp Smith (1941, 129-132) argues that nature leads Hume to “subordinate” his sceptical doubts, a claim that might be read to suggest that Hume comes to ignore those doubts, but he also suggests that nature can act as an “arbiter” of scepticism and that scepticism can be an “ally of nature,” claims that imply that if nature and scepticism interact with one another in the proper way, the concerns prompted by the dilemma will dissipate. Kemp Smith does not, however, explain how this interaction might work. For an elaboration of the relation of Kemp Smith’s argument and accounts that privilege the Title Principle, see Ainslie 2015, 230-232.

¹¹ Garrett 2015b, 42. Along similar lines, Schmitt calls the Title Principle a way to “defeat” the dilemma (2014, 369), Schafer says it “represents a way of avoiding” the dilemma (2014, 3), and Qu contends that it is Hume’s “answer” to the dilemma (forthcoming).

are informed by the sort of reason that does not subvert itself. On this basis, some proponents of the Title Principle claim that it averts the poles of the dilemma.¹²

The trouble with this claim, however, is that the sort of reason that does not subvert itself, Hume has suggested, is false reason. And the Title Principle offers no way to evade the sort of false reason Hume has just been describing. If Hume assents to trivial suggestions of the imagination where reason is lively and mixes with a passion—when, say, he is curious—he still will be unable to look upon any opinion “as more probable or likely than another” (T 1.4.7.8). That is because, for Hume, the “errors, obscurities, and absurdities” of false reason did not arise because reason was not lively or because it did not mix with a propensity (T 1.4.7.6). Instead, they arose because our beliefs depend not merely on reason, but also on trivial suggestions of the imagination not founded on reason. Trivial suggestions of the imagination, Hume says, are dangerous *to reason*. Indeed, he says that “[n]othing is more dangerous to reason” than such suggestions of the imagination. (T 1.4.7.6)

In a particularly influential account—seemingly motivated by this problem—Don Garrett takes a different tack: even though the Title Principle does not rule out false reason, he suggests, it still tells us which of our reasoning to accept.¹³ Garrett’s argument is that the Title Principle, once articulated, is necessarily accepted, and that this principle justifies the dissipation of our *concerns* about false reason, even if not the *basis* for those concerns. Initially, Garrett claims, the reasoning that produces our concerns about false reason generates lively assent, which is to say it generates belief in those concerns. But the liveliness underlying this belief, he argues, “proves to be very limited beyond the initial shock, and it, too, mixes little

¹² For such views, see Qu forthcoming; Owen 1999, 217; Schmitt 2014, 268-375; Schafer 2014, 13; Garrett 1997, 234. Garrett’s later work takes a slightly different approach.

¹³ Garrett 2004, 86-87; Garrett 2006, 165-170; Garrett 2015a, 218-237; Garrett 2015b, 32-53.

with any propensity.”¹⁴ Because our initial concerns about false reason are no longer lively nor mix with any propensity, they have no title over us per the Title Principle, and so we are able to continue onward with other reasoning, and thus back to philosophy.

Ingenious as it is, this account faces several key difficulties. As an initial matter, the Title Principle still does not, on this account, justify the dissipation of Hume’s concern with false reason. Garrett’s suggestion is that because Hume tires of his sceptical doubts, naturally turning to indolence after his encounter the dilemma, Hume is able to permanently reject those doubts—including his concerns about false reason—under the Title Principle and move on with philosophy. But one need not read Hume’s respite this way. Hume’s concern with false reason arose from lively reasoning that mixed with propensities like curiosity and ambition. When Hume tires of this reasoning, he is hardly foreclosed from returning—later on—to the same despair-inducing reasoning. The Title Principle, then, justifies both the rejection and the renewal of Hume’s concerns. Whether Hume is concerned about false reason at a given moment, therefore, will simply depend on what sort of reasoning is lively and mixes with a propensity within him at that particular moment.

One might think that Hume will, as he proceeds with philosophy, simply recall his encounter with the dilemma and thereby avert further descents into despair about false reason. The Title Principle, however, does not offer any such assurance. As others have noted,¹⁵ it is not clear how the Title Principle avoids warranting *all* beliefs: reason may be lively and mix with a propensity and yet be fallacious. Garrett tries to evade this result by claiming that “reason,” in the Title Principle, refers to a self-reflective form of reason, whereby we refine our beliefs based on experience—particularly based on the rules of probable reasoning Hume

¹⁴ Garrett 2015b, 42. See also Garrett 2015a, 230-31; Garrett 2006, 169.

¹⁵ See Qu forthcoming; Ainslie 2015, 233; Schafer 2014, 14.

identified in T 1.3.15.¹⁶ But even if we read Hume this way—and it is not clear we should, given that Hume does nothing to distinguish the notion of reason he employs in the Title Principle from the notion of reason he employs in his discussion of false reason—reflective reasoning of this sort does not rule out the reemergence of concerns with false reason. After all, it was Hume’s reflective reasoning in Book I that yielded his concern with false reason in the first place. When this concern emerges, or reemerges, Hume has no reasoned response to it: The Title Principle only justifies the dissipation of his concern with false reason once that concern has already dissipated naturally, by way of a turn to indolence.

Indeed, shortly after stating the Title Principle, Hume concedes that he has not ruled out superstitious reasoning. He notes that superstition “seizes more strongly on the mind” than philosophy and then “make[s] bold to recommend philosophy” against it (T 1.4.7.13). If the Title Principle provided a way of averting Hume’s concern with false reason—and a way of warranting the proper sort of self-reflective reasoning—one would not expect Hume to address superstition as a live option in wake of it. Yet Hume does so. More than that, he does not marshal the Title Principle in support of his “bold” recommendation for philosophy. Instead, Hume asserts that “[g]enerally speaking, the errors in religion [i.e. in superstition] are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous,” a claim that says nothing of why superstitious beliefs are epistemically unwarranted as opposed to merely unfortunate (T 1.4.7.13).¹⁷

Given the foregoing, the Title Principle begins to look, to borrow a phrase from Peter Millican, like “a stage in Hume’s train of thought rather than a principle to which he gives enduring weight.”¹⁸ If the Title Principle will not prevent Hume from repeatedly reviving his

¹⁶ Garrett 2015a, 230; Garrett 2015b, 42.

¹⁷ For elaboration on this point, see Qu forthcoming; Winkler 1999, 199-200.

¹⁸ Millican 2015, 38 n.42.

concerns about false reason, and if it does not rule out superstition, then it does not seem to be a “third choice” to the dilemma’s two prongs.¹⁹ Instead, the Title Principle seems more like a merely descriptive statement of *how*, on Hume’s view, we think about our reasoning: when our reasoning is lively and mixes with some propensity, we think it ought to be assented to, and when our reasoning is not lively, we think it has no title to operate upon us.

If the Title Principle is not a “third choice” to the prongs of the dilemma, it may seem that Hume’s only response to the dilemma—when he continues with philosophy—is to distance himself from it in one of the ways described above, namely by putting the dilemma out of mind altogether or by employing a sort of ironic detachment in relation to the philosophical claims he advances in wake of it. A few scholars, however, have advanced positions whereby Hume neither distances himself from the dilemma nor resolves it.

There are two primary approaches of this sort, which I mention here only briefly by way of context. The first approach denies that Hume is ever seriously concerned about the dilemma, suggesting instead that his articulation of the dilemma is meant to dramatize a false philosophical mindset—a mindset which he never adopts. On this view, Hume has no need to either distance himself from the dilemma or to resolve it, as he does not take the dilemma seriously in the first place.²⁰ The second approach denies that Hume aspires to a coherent philosophical system of the sort generally attributed him. Under this view, Hume instead takes on different perspectives in different contexts—for instance, moving between the perspectives

¹⁹ Perhaps because of this weakness, Allison suggests that instead of justifying the dissipation of our *concerns* about false reason, as Garrett suggests, the Title Principle justifies philosophy as *reliant* upon false reason, giving license to a “dogmatism of the present moment” (2005, 329; 2008, 318, 324, 393 n. 15.). But it is not clear how affirming philosophy as reliant on false reason can assuage Hume’s despair—which arose from concern about that very possibility.

²⁰ For example, see Baier 1991, 1-27, Morris 2000, 89-109, and Ainslie 2015, 237-245.

of “the gentlemanly Hume, the wise Hume, and the Pyrrhonian Hume”—and does not attempt to resolve inconsistencies between these perspectives.²¹

It would be a sizable task to give a full accounting of the merits of these alternatives to the Title Principle and an even more sizable task to also give such an accounting for the alternatives mentioned at the outset of this Section. My aim in mentioning these additional accounts is merely to situate the Title Principle—and, shortly, my own account—in relation to these various strands of the literature. In my view, a close look at Hume’s language in the Conclusion offers a possibility distinct from these accounts and the Title Principle, one that better fits the full arc of Hume’s narrative. It is to that possibility that I now turn.

3. Hume’s “Sceptical Principles”

In the Conclusion, Hume repeatedly invokes what he calls his “sceptical principles.” Scholars tend to place these statements in a supporting role, either as mere warnings against overconfidence,²² or as leading to the Title Principle.²³ In my view, however, Hume’s sceptical principles are at the core of his response to the dilemma—which is not to solve it or to ignore it or to cast it simply as false, but rather to draw a fundamental lesson from it about how to do philosophy. The lesson is this: when we are inclined to inquire into the nature of reality—which many of us, Hume says, inevitably are—we should be wary of (1) embracing our beliefs about the world or (2) embracing our doubts about the possibility of knowing the world. That

²¹ The view described here is advanced in Fogelin 1998, 164-167. For a perspectivist approach that emphasizes Hume’s segmentation between different domains of life, in particular the domain of philosophy and the domain of everyday life, see Hakkarainen 2012, 283-309.

²² See, e.g., Owen 1999, 221; de Pierris 2015, 298.

²³ See, e.g., Garrett 1997, 236-237; Garrett 2004, 86-87; Allison 2005, 332-337; Allison 2008, 321-326; Schmitt 2014, 366-372.

is, the dangers of false reason and no reason teach us to adopt an approach akin to what Hume later calls “mitigated scepticism” in the *Enquiry*: a particular form of diffidence.

3.1. *Hume’s Explication of His Sceptical Principles*

To grasp Hume’s meaning in the Conclusion requires a careful reading of the rather winding and elliptical narrative that, from T. 1.4.7.8 to T 1.4.7.15, follows his explication of the dangerous dilemma. Initially, Hume tells us, the dilemma envelops him in the “deepest darkness,” leaving him unable to trust his cognitive faculties (T 1.4.7.8). And, echoing his earlier comments about the “impossibility of amending or correcting” those faculties (T 1.4.7.1), Hume says that “reason is incapable of dispelling” his despairing thoughts (T 1.4.7.9). But “[m]ost fortunately it happens” that nature intervenes: it “cures [him] of this philosophical melancholy and delirium,” relaxing his mind and guiding him to other avocations (T 1.4.7.9). “I dine,” Hume tells us, “I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends” (T. 1.4.7.9). This “three or four hour’s amusement” saps the liveliness of the philosophical speculations that yielded the dilemma: when Hume returns to them, “they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous” that he “cannot... enter into them” (T 1.4.7.9).²⁴

Following nature’s intervention, Hume finds himself reduced to an “indolent belief in the general maxims of the world” and thus “determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life” (T 1.4.7.10). But, critically, he is not entirely indolent. Instead, Hume retains enough of his “former disposition”—i.e., enough of his concern with the dilemma—to consider affirmatively rejecting philosophy altogether: he is “ready to throw

²⁴ On accounts holding that Hume presents the dilemma as a false philosophical mindset, his descent into despair and emergence from it must be read either as histrionics or as a period in which Hume comes to recognize that it is the dilemma—not him—that is confused. But neither possibility is at all clear from Hume’s language in the Conclusion. These accounts thus proceed by suggesting tensions between the dilemma and either Hume’s prior statements in the *Treatise* (Ainslie 2015, 238, 242-243) or his later ones (Baier 1991, 277-288).

all [his] books and papers into the fire” and to “resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.10). That is, Hume considers making an irrevocable principle of his doubts about philosophy by fully embracing indolence.

Yet Hume rejects this course and, in doing so, makes his first reference to his sceptical principles. He says: “I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles” (T 1.4.7.10). That is, Hume’s sceptical principles tell him to not fully embrace his doubts about philosophy—and throw his books into the fire—and instead to yield to the indolence he is naturally experiencing in the present moment. Hume’s submission here is “blind” because it is not a product of reason, but rather something more akin to an act of faith. Reason has left Hume ready to abandon philosophy forever, but something beyond reason—sceptical principles—leads him not to do so, and instead merely to welcome, at least for the present moment, the indolence that nature has instilled in him. Hume’s sceptical principles, then, suggest that he be sceptical even about his doubts, i.e. that he suspend even his belief, so to speak, in his disbelief in the possibility of philosophy.

“But does it follow,” Hume then asks, “that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure,” and return, instead, to the “subtilties and sophistries” of the inquiries that yielded the dangerous dilemma (T 1.4.7.10)? This question may seem to contradict what Hume said a sentence earlier. Hume just explained that his sceptical principles dictate that he must yield to nature, which is to say that he must yield to the indolence he is naturally experiencing in the present moment, and yet now he asks if it somehow “follows” that he must strive *against* nature, towards philosophy?

This contradiction, however, is only apparent, a byproduct of the antithetical underpinnings of Hume’s sceptical principles. Hume followed his sceptical principles by

yielding to nature rather than fully embracing his philosophical doubts. Now he wonders: if I am sceptical even about my scepticism, must I choose to do philosophy? “No,” he answers: “If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance” (T 1.4.7.10). In other words, Hume will only do philosophy when he finds it natural and agreeable to do so. Again, Hume is not relying on a principle of reason in order to ground his philosophical inquiries. Instead, he is blindly submitting to nature, and in doing so opening himself to the possibility of sometimes doing philosophy and sometimes not. Hume’s sceptical principles, then, dictate that he be sceptical not just about his doubts about the possibility of doing philosophy, but also about his beliefs that he should do philosophy at all. Thus, just as Hume refused to make a principle of his doubts about philosophy, he now refuses to make a principle of doing philosophy at all.

Hume’s submissions to nature, therefore, are provisional ones. They guide him when he runs up against the edge, so to speak, of the capacities of human reason. Hume elaborates on this point in the following paragraph. Philosophy, he says there, has “nothing to oppose” the sentiments of indolence and ill humor that have taken hold in him (T 1.4.7.11). A return to philosophy, therefore, will not flow “from the force of reason and conviction,” but rather must flow from the “return[] of a serious good-humour’d disposition,” which is to say from nature (T 1.4.7.11). And when such a disposition returns, Hume now crucially admonishes, “[i]n all the incidents of life we ought to preserve our scepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ’tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. Nay, if we are to be philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and upon an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner” (T 1.4.7.11).

Hume here is articulating a particular manner of submitting to nature. When nature inclines us to do philosophy—just as when it inclines us to indolence—he says that we ought to proceed only in accordance with sceptical principles, which is to say with scepticism about our beliefs as well as our doubts. We must guard, that is, against fully embracing the products of our reasoning, whether they be constructive or destructive of belief. The term Hume employs a few paragraphs later on this score is “diffidence.” A “true sceptic,” he says, “will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction” (T 1.4.7.14).

In the *Treatise*, Hume does not define precisely what he means by “diffidence”—a term that denotes, and denoted in Hume’s time, modesty born of a lack of self-confidence.²⁵ His meaning, however, appears to anticipate the “mitigated scepticism” he would later set out in the *Enquiry*, a form of scepticism that counsels us to remain “diffident in [our] determinations” (EHU 12.24).²⁶ In explaining his mitigated scepticism in the *Enquiry*, Hume says that if “dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding,” their recognition of those infirmities will “naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve” (EHU 12.24). A few sentences later, he adds: “if any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of PYRRHONISM might

²⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “diffidence” as:

1. Lack of confidence or faith in someone or something; distrust; mistrust, misgiving, doubt. Also: an instance of this; a doubt, a misgiving. Now *rare* except as merged with sense 2.
2. Doubt in one’s own ability, merit, or judgment; lack of self-confidence; modesty or shyness resulting from this. Also: an instance of this.

(Oxford English Dictionary 2019). The Dictionary contains instances of the former usage beginning in the 15th century and instances of the latter usage beginning in the 16th century.

²⁶ Hume’s usage here is consistent with the above definition and with the other three times in the *Enquiry* when he employs the term “diffidence” or “diffident.” See EHU 7.28, 12.3, and 12.18. It is also consistent with his uses of the term in the *Treatise*, both of which occur in the Conclusion, once in T 1.4.7.14, as just mentioned, and in T 1.4.7.1. In T 1.4.7.1, Hume says that his “memory of past errors and perplexities” has made him “diffident for the future.”

abate their pride by showing them” that any advantages they might possess over others of lesser learning are so small as to be “inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature” (EHU 12.24).

There are clear parallels between these comments in the *Enquiry* and Hume’s earlier discussion in the *Treatise*: the “infirmities of human nature” recall the infirmities that give rise to the choice between false reason and no reason, while Hume’s call for a sort of “modesty and reserve” informed by “a small tincture of PYRRHONISM,” echoes his identification of the “true sceptic” in the *Treatise* with someone who is “diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction.” Hume adds, in the *Enquiry*: “In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner” (EHU 12.24). Of course, a “degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty” cannot solve the “perplexity and confusion” that Hume suggests is “inherent in human nature” (EHU 12.24). But it may guide us in our inquiries.²⁷

This sort of diffidence—retaining a degree of doubt, caution, and modesty about our philosophical convictions as well as our philosophical doubts—likewise does not solve the dilemma. When we philosophize, we will run into the errors, absurdities, and obscurities that Hume has said are inherent in false reason, and if we try to eliminate them, we will end up with no reason at all. Rather, the diffidence of the true sceptic merely offers an orientation toward this intractable situation when we try to do philosophy. It reflects what the intractability of the

²⁷ Scholars have invoked the “mitigated scepticism” of the *Enquiry* in explicating the Conclusion. See, e.g., de Pierris 2015, 299-306; Passmore 1980, 149-150. But they do not argue (as I continue to do in the next part) that Hume’s diffidence in the Conclusion reflects the mitigated scepticism in the *Enquiry*. Instead, these accounts draw on the *Enquiry* to indicate Hume’s mature response to his sceptical doubts. Indeed, Qu argues that Hume advanced mitigated scepticism in the *Enquiry* in order to shore up inadequacies in the Conclusion (forthcoming).

dilemma teaches: when we try to do philosophy, we will confront a choice between false reason and no reason at all, a choice we cannot escape by reasoning.

It may sound as if this sort of diffidence will simply lead us back to “no reason.” How diffident, after all, should we be? If we are diffident even about our belief in the importance of diffidence, perhaps we will once again find ourselves unable to reason at all, in the throes of total scepticism. But it is important not to demand too much from the lesson Hume draws from the dilemma. Hume does not rule out future descents into “no reason.” Crucially, however, he has suggested that such descents will be temporary. Nature will intervene, curing our “philosophical melancholy and delirium” (T 1.4.7.9) and, when it does, the dangers of the dilemma will counsel against our fully embracing our philosophical beliefs or our doubts about philosophy.²⁸ The emergence of the dilemma, then, need not mark the end of philosophy, but may teach us—indeed, remind us—how to do philosophy.

It also may sound as if a diffident approach simply accedes to false reason, rendering the notion of continuing with philosophy unintelligible. After all, if we are able to reason at all, Hume suggests, we must be engaged in false reason. And surely a philosophical system must be able to separate good beliefs from bad ones. Once again, however, it is important not to overstate Hume’s aims in responding to the dilemma. Near the end of the Conclusion, Hume expresses the “hope” that his philosophy will “establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true... might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14).²⁹ But he acknowledges that this system may be built

²⁸ In this very limited sense, I agree with those who cast Hume as a “perspectivist.” That is, Hume does not rule out returning—temporarily—to the crisis of the dilemma.

²⁹ Accounts that suggest that Hume must, if he cannot resolve the dilemma, either ignore it or ironize his philosophical project, fail to entertain the possibility that Hume alludes to here: that the dilemma prompts him to refine his view of philosophy. This does not mean, in my view,

on what is, in a sense, a false foundation: a “true” system, Hume says, “perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for” (T 1.4.7.14). The task of building a “satisfactory”—even if not “true”—system is not for the Conclusion, but for Hume’s broader philosophical project. At this stage of that project, the lesson Hume draws from the danger of false reason is not simply to accept it, but rather that we should always remain diffident in light of it.³⁰

How, then, should we think about the two sentences that comprise the Title Principle? These two sentences immediately follow Hume’s admonishment: “Nay, if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and upon an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner” (T 1.4.7.11). As I noted above, the Title Principle does not seem to tell us how to change our reasoning in order to evade the dilemma, but rather affirms how, on Hume’s account of the mind, we reason naturally. Within the context I have just described, this makes sense. Hume has stated that when we are inclined to do philosophy, we should proceed only under sceptical principles. Subject to that important constraint, the Title Principle simply says that we should reason as we naturally do.

3.2. *The Paths Forward under Sceptical Principles*

Attention to Hume’s sceptical principles also helps make sense of the portion of the Conclusion following the Title Principle, which proponents of the Title Principle have tended to deemphasize. In this part of the Conclusion, Hume suggests that many of us have a deep need to inquire into the underlying nature of reality and that, when we do so, his sceptical

that the dilemma reflected a false philosophical mindset; it means that the dilemma illustrated the impossibility of a certain vision of what philosophy can achieve.

³⁰ One might object to my reading, in a somewhat related vein, on the ground that it does not rule out particular beliefs as unjustified. That is, my reading might seem, arguably like the Title Principle, to justify all belief. This objection, however, confuses my account of Hume’s aims. I do not read Hume as seeking to devise a principle as to when a given belief is justified. Instead, I read Hume to be articulating his orientation toward philosophy in light of the dilemma.

principles recommend philosophy as against superstition. Hume describes three possible states of mind about reasoning beyond “common life” in this way. For each of these states of mind, Hume suggests, his sceptical principles lead the way forward.

Hume first describes his own state of mind as one of strength. He reports tiring, as it were, of indolence, and finds himself “naturally *inclin’d*” to return to his inquiries in philosophy, driven by curiosity and ambition (T 1.4.7.12). “These sentiments,” Hume says, “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” (T 1.4.7.12). Hume here is following his sceptical principles: he returns to reasoning beyond common life, and particularly to philosophy, because it is more natural and agreeable for him to philosophize than to remain indolent. That is, Hume is once again blindly submitting to nature, but now doing so leads him philosophy, not to indolence as it did in T 1.4.7.10. Does this mean that Hume’s embrace of philosophy is without the sort of diffidence he alludes to in the prior paragraphs? No: here he is merely describing the “origin” of his philosophy; a few paragraphs later he returns to the question of *how* to do it.

Before elaborating on that question, Hume turns to a second possible state of mind, that of weakness. What, he asks, if curiosity and ambition did not lead him to inquire beyond common life and back to philosophy (T 1.4.7.13)? He answers: “it wou’d necessarily happen that from my very weakness I must be led” into inquiries beyond common life, even if not necessarily to philosophy (T 1.4.7.13). Hume notes that, in this weakness, he might be attracted to superstition, a mode of inquiry that does not confine itself, like philosophy, to the “visible,” or empirical, world (T 1.4.7.13). Indeed, Hume says, it is “almost impossible” for the mind to remain only in the sphere of common life, and so the operative question “concern[s] the choice of our guide,” which is to say the choice between philosophy and superstition (T

1.4.7.13). He then states that we “ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable,” and “in this respect [Hume] make[s] bold to recommend philosophy” (T 1.4.7.13).

Proponents of the Title Principle struggle with this part of Hume’s analysis. If the Title Principle is Hume’s way to avoid the errors, absurdities, and obscurities of false reason, then why is Hume now weighing philosophy against superstition, a mode of reasoning that leads to errors, absurdities, and obscurities? And if the Title Principle does not rule out superstition, then Hume’s argument seems insufficient to explain—as proponents of the Title Principle seek to do—why philosophical beliefs are warranted but superstitious beliefs are not. Recall that Hume merely states, “Generally speaking, the errors in religion [i.e. in superstition] are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous,” a claim that does not speak to why philosophy has any more epistemic merit than superstition (T 1.4.7.13).

Hume’s sceptical principles help explain what is going on here. Hume has suggested that there is no way to eliminate the errors, obscurities, and absurdities of false reason without falling into the total scepticism of no reason at all. That will be true for both philosophy and superstition: both depend on the imagination’s enlivening of ideas, and thus both are forms—albeit disparate forms—of false reason. The question for Hume, then, is not why philosophical beliefs are warranted and superstitious beliefs are not. Instead, the question is which of these forms of false reason is preferable—i.e., which set of unavoidable errors, absurdities, and obscurities to choose. It is in this context that Hume concludes that the “errors” of superstition are more “dangerous” than those of philosophy (T 1.4.7.13).

This conclusion about dangerousness follows from the lesson Hume draws from the dangerous dilemma, namely that when he reasons beyond the sphere of common life, he ought to remain diffident about his beliefs as well as his doubts. Prior to describing the errors of superstition as dangerous, Hume distinguishes between superstition and philosophy in a

manner tied to diffidence: whereas philosophy “contents itself with assigning new causes and principles to the phaenomena, which appear in the visible world,” superstition “opens a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (T 1.4.7.13). Superstition poses greater dangers than philosophy, then, because it fails to comport with the degree of diffidence about belief that the dangerous dilemma teaches.

A parallel with Hume’s “mitigated scepticism” in the *Enquiry* is again instructive. Mitigated scepticism, for Hume, has two aspects: (1) diffidence, as noted above, and (2) “the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding,” which is to say to “such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience” (EHU 12.25). The second aspect of mitigated scepticism—limitation of inquiry—is intertwined with, if not subsumed within, the first aspect: diffidence counsels against overconfidence about our ability to inquire into subjects unsuited to our understanding (EHU 12.25). If we are diffident, then, we should constrain our inquiries in the manner Hume identifies with philosophy in T 1.4.7.13, and therefore we should avoid unconstrained inquiries into the supernatural like the ones he there identifies with superstition.

Let us not overstate what Hume claims here. He is “ma[king] bold to recommend philosophy” to the person tempted by superstition (T 1.4.7.13); he is not arguing that the temptation *must* be avoided. It is the task of Hume’s broader philosophical system to set out, in a manner that “might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14), what distinguishes philosophy from superstition, and why philosophy is a better guide. At this stage, Hume is merely explicating how we might proceed when we are inclined to reason beyond common life—and underscoring how his sceptical principles cut against engaging in speculations beyond the empirical world. Of course, one might be diffident even about one’s diffidence about reasoning beyond the empirical world, or one might welcome the dangers

Hume describes. Hume does not rule out the possibility of such choices; he simply recommends against them in light of what he has found. The same is true in the *Enquiry*. There, Hume says we “will never be tempted” to reason beyond the empirical world once we recognize “the imperfection of those faculties which [we] employ,” but he makes no claim that reasoning beyond the empirical world is unjustified in some deeper sense (EHU 12.25).

Now that Hume has considered these “two cases of the strength and weakness of the mind,” he considers a third possible mindset: the mindset of the “honest gentleman” who simply does not inquire beyond common life at all (T 1.4.7.14). Hume makes clear that he does not intend to make the honest gentleman into a philosopher. Instead, he says, “I wish we cou’d communicate to our founders of systems” part of the “earthy mixture” of the honest gentleman, and thereby “temper those fiery particles” of which such founders “are compos’d” (T 1.4.7.14). Even those uninterested in inquiring beyond common life bring to mind, for Hume, his sceptical principles: he wishes they could help remind the rest of us to be diffident.

With this wish as a point of departure, Hume recapitulates his sceptical principles and gives them perhaps their clearest articulation: “A true sceptic,” he says, “will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical convictions” (T 1.4.7.14). And, as Hume affirms at end of the Conclusion, he is, at least in this sense, a “sceptic” (T 1.4.7.15). If nature is the “origin” of Hume’s philosophy (or, in a weakened state, the origin of his superstition), these principles reiterate the attitude with which he should approach nature—an attitude whereby “we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14).

Conclusion

I have argued that rather than advancing a solution to the dangerous dilemma, as proponents of the Title Principle suggest, Hume draws a lesson from the dilemma—a lesson that flows from the conclusion that the dilemma has no solution. That is, Hume does not emerge from the dilemma with a conviction in the reliability of his beliefs. Instead, he emerges humbled, convinced only that he should be diffident in light of the dangers of the dilemma, which is to say diffident about both his philosophical beliefs (given the danger of false reason) and his doubts about the possibility of philosophy (given the danger of no reason).

This lesson anticipates the lesson of mitigated scepticism that Hume would later set out in the *Enquiry*. It teaches us how to do philosophy, and particularly how (and why) to guard against the pitfalls of two of Hume’s main targets: superstition and traditional metaphysics. And it marks a fitting culmination of Book I. If Hume solved the dangerous dilemma with the Title Principle, he would be advancing a pivotal new argument in a section he calls the “Conclusion of this book.” On my view, by contrast, Hume offers something more akin to the summation one would expect in a conclusion. He charts a course forward that takes his findings seriously and proceeds in accordance with what they teach: diffidence.

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