

Hume on inductive scepticism

著者	Helen Beebee
journal or publication title	Journal of International Philosophy
number	3
page range	213-221
year	2014-03-31
URL	http://doi.org/10.34428/00008183



Hume on inductive scepticism

Helen Beebee

1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a brief account of the role of scepticism in Hume's philosophy, drawing and explaining a sharp contrast with the role it plays in Descartes'.

Hume, unlike Descartes, sometimes describes himself as a 'sceptical' philosopher. On one way of interpreting what Hume is up to, this self-description is manifestly appropriate: Hume, unlike Descartes, finds no solid foundations upon which to found our beliefs either about the external world – not its causal structure, nor indeed its very existence. So Hume is stuck with scepticism in a way that Descartes isn't.

There is something right about this way of thinking about Hume's position. However, it overlooks the subtlety and complexity of Hume's view. Hume, unlike Descartes, has to face the question whether sceptical doubt is (to use an expression of Steve Buckle; see Buckle 2001, 310–11) 'livable': whether we could seriously live our lives while suspending the very beliefs that enable us to engage effectively with the world around us. In the end, it is the lack of 'livability' of sceptical doubt that provides the basis for Hume's response to the sceptical challenge. The wholesale suspension of belief is something that is not only psychologically impossible; even if it *were* possible, it would – to put it mildly – seriously incapacitate us. At worst, we simply wouldn't be able to survive. And Hume thinks it cannot be philosophically legitimate to endorse an attitude that would have such a damaging effect on our ability to live our lives.

In a sense, then, the key to understanding Hume's approach to scepticism lies in the concept of *doubt*. Descartes, of course, couches scepticism in the language of doubt: precisely what he asks us to do in the first Meditation is to suspend belief in all claims that are susceptible to doubt. But doubt, for Descartes, is a mere device: suspension of belief is an intellectual exercise we are supposed to go through as a step on the path to uncovering firm justificatory foundations for (most of) the beliefs that, at first sight, are dubitable. Hume, by contrast, finds no such firm foundations. To this extent, perhaps, his position is 'sceptical'. But Hume takes the *real* threat of scepticism to be the Pyrrhonian sceptic's claim that – in the absence of such justification – beliefs that are dubitable should *actually* be doubted. And it is this claim that Hume denies. So, in another sense – and, I think, in the sense that is more important to Hume – he is not a sceptic at all.

In this paper, I shall consider only Hume's attitude to *inductive* scepticism, setting aside his much more complex and difficult approach to external-world scepticism. However, I think his basic attitude is more or less the same in both cases. After saying something briefly about what Edward Craig calls the 'Image of God' doctrine, and Hume's opposition to it, in §2, I'll sketch my interpretation of Hume's discussion of inductive reasoning in §3. In §4 I turn to the issue of scepticism, and in §5 I briefly consider the methodological role of scepticism in Hume's philosophy.

2. *The science of man and the image of God*

Hume, as we all know, was an empiricist. His aim, as stated in the Introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), is to instigate the ‘science of man’. And the appropriate method, Hume thinks, is ‘experimental philosophy’: ‘the only solid foundation we can give to this science ... must be laid on experience and observation’. Hume’s science of man, then, is the ‘application of experimental philosophy to moral subjects.’ (T xx)

Hume’s contemporary status as a founding father of analytic philosophy in the empiricist tradition thus needs to be approached with a certain amount of caution; indeed, as I shall argue, in the particular case of the Problem of Induction Hume’s interests are more psychological than epistemological. Hume’s attitude to scepticism, too, needs to be disassociated from contemporary discussions of scepticism, which largely focus on the issue of justification rather than the issue of actual doubt.

An important feature of the context of Hume’s work is his opposition to what Edward Craig (1987) calls the ‘Image of God’ doctrine, according to which human beings are imperfect versions of God. The Image of God doctrine carries with it substantive epistemological commitments, and at least part of Hume’s aim is to show that those commitments are spurious. For example, the Image of God doctrine drives the view that in principle, *a priori* access to the nature of the world is possible. Such a view naturally leads to a conception of the causal structure of the world that is analogous to logical entailment, so that stages in a causal process are like stages of a mathematical proof: if we could fully comprehend the nature of the cause, we would be able to infer *a priori* what the next stage in the process would be. Thus, for example, the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* (nothing comes from nothing) was generally taken to be a conceptual truth, knowable *a priori*, as was the related principle that a cause must contain at least as much reality as its effect – a principle that Descartes famously used in his ‘Trademark Argument’ for the existence of God in the *Meditations*.

Hume, in opposition to this consequence of the Image of God doctrine, holds that: ‘If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits.’ (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 1748 – henceforth ‘E’ – 164). His discussion of inductive inference is aimed, at least in part, at establishing this claim that the inference from causes to effects cannot be *a priori*. From a contemporary perspective, this is hardly a claim that needs to be justified; but of course the acknowledged implausibility of the Image of God doctrine is part of the philosophical debt we owe to Hume.

3. *Inductive inference (or causal reasoning)*

Hume is often credited with inventing, and showing to be insoluble, the ‘Problem of Induction’. PI is the problem of justifying the belief that the unobserved resembles the observed. For example, on every previous occasion when I pressed the brake in a car, the car slowed down; and so, this time I press the brake, I expect the car to do the same. But what, if anything, justifies this belief? That the car has slowed down in the past does not *entail* that it will do so on this occasion; so why should we think that my experience of past slowing-downs *justifies* the belief that it will slow down now? Or, in other words, what justifies the *inference* from ‘all previous brake-pressings have been followed by slowing down’ to ‘this brake-pressing will be followed by slowing down?’ An adequate answer to this question would be a solution to PI; unfortunately such an answer turns out to be very hard (and, according to some philosophers, impossible) to come up with.

While, as we shall see, the main elements of PI are certainly present in Hume’s discussion, it is not at all clear that he is really concerned with the problem of induction – a problem about the *justification* of beliefs about the unobserved – at all. In fact, I shall claim, his concern is rather with the psychological question of *how* belief in

the unobserved arises.

Inductive inference and causation

One important difference between PI as standardly understood and Hume's discussion is that for Hume, 'inductive' inference is reasoning from causes to effects (he does not use the terms 'inductive' and 'induction' at all; he merely talks, in the *Enquiry* (E 36), about our being 'induced to expect' effects). Indeed, his discussion of what I shall call causal reasoning – the inference from cause to effect – is an essential part of a larger project, that of examining the 'idea' of causation (we can think of Hume's 'ideas' roughly as concepts). As we shall see, Hume's own view about causal reasoning is that the inference is a matter of mere custom or habit. Having observed sufficiently many Cs being followed by Es, on observing a C we *automatically* come to expect an E to follow – not as a result of any process of 'argument or ratiocination' (E 39) but as a result of an associative mechanism: the same psychological mechanism that leads a dog to expect a walk when its lead is taken off its hook. And it turns out, in Hume's famous discussion of the idea of necessary connection (in the *Treatise* Book I, Part III, § 14 – T 155–73 – and the *Enquiry*, § 7, E 60–79), that it is the operation of this mechanism – the 'determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant' (T 165) – that provides the impression-source for this idea (Hume being an empiricist, all legitimate ideas must have their source in an element of experience, or an 'impression').

So for Hume, (a) judging that one event is the cause of another, and (b) inferring the existence of the second on the basis of past experience of similar events being 'constantly conjoined' are very closely connected: 'when one species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning [namely custom or habit], which can alone assure us of any matter of fact or existence. We then call the one object, *Cause*; the other, *Effect*.' (E 75) Hume's point here is not that, having established, via inductive inference, that the two 'species of event' are constantly conjoined, we *infer* that the first is a cause of the second; rather, our inferring the second event and our thinking of it as an effect of the first are two sides of the same coin, the inference supplying the impression of necessary connection on the basis of which we make the causal judgment. This approach contrasts sharply with most contemporary discussions of PI, which tend to focus on the inference from the observed to the unobserved in isolation from any judgments we might happen to make about a causal connection between the relevant events or objects (see for example Howson 2000).

The argument

Hume himself often talks about looking for a 'foundation' for the inference from causes to effects. Note, however, that this can be given an epistemological or a psychological reading: a 'foundation' for the inference might be something that confers justification on it, or else it might be something that explains *how* the inference happens. For now, I shall preserve this ambiguity and just focus on sketching the argument; I shall later return to the question of whether we should think of Hume's interest as a psychological or an epistemological interest. Here, then, is how Hume's argument concerning causal reasoning – the inference from causes to effects – proceeds. (I shall follow the *Treatise* version of the overall argument.)

First of all, Hume establishes that 'the inference we draw from cause to effect, is not deriv'd merely from a survey of these particular objects, and from such a penetration into their essences as may discover the dependence of the one upon the other.' (T 86) In other words, we cannot tell, just by examining one object or event, what its effects will be. We can be sure of this because '[s]uch an inference wou'd amount to knowledge, and

would imply the absolute contradiction and impossibility of conceiving any thing different;’ (T 86-7) whereas clearly it always *is* conceivable that the effect might not occur. It might be a well-established fact that if you drop a wine glass on a stone floor from a great height it will shatter, but we can perfectly well *imagine* it failing to do so (while we cannot similarly imagine, say, Socrates’s being a man and all men are being mortal, and yet Socrates not being mortal). Since, according to what is sometimes called Hume’s ‘Conceivability Principle’, nothing whose denial is conceivable can be known *a priori*, it cannot be known *a priori*, and just on the basis of the observation or examination of *c*, that *e* will be one of its effects. Hume concludes from this that it is ‘by EXPERIENCE only, that we can infer the existence of one object from that of another.’ (T 87) In other words, it is only when we have experienced several *Cs* being followed by *Es* that we are able, on observing a *C*, to infer that an *E* will follow.

Having established that inference from causes to effects proceeds on the basis of past observation of constant conjunction, Hume asks ‘[w]hether experience produces the idea [of the effect] by means of the understanding or of the imagination; whether we are determin’d by reason to make the transition, or by a certain association and relation of perceptions.’ (T 88-9) Hume will eventually conclude that the correct account is the latter; so he needs to rule out the possibility that the inference from cause to effect is founded on some process of reasoning or argument and is therefore the product of the understanding. And, he thinks, there is only one possible way this could work: ‘If reason determin’d us, it would proceed upon that principle, *that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same.*’ (T 89) This principle is often known as the ‘Principle of the Uniformity of Nature’ (PUN). So the suggestion Hume is considering is that the inference from cause to effect proceeds something like this:

- (P1) *Cs* have always been followed by *Es* in my experience
- (P2) A *C* has just occurred
- (P3) Instances I haven’t observed resemble instances I have observed (PUN)

Therefore

- (C) An *E* will occur.

Hume then asks on what (P3) is founded: ‘let us consider all the arguments, upon which such a proposition [PUN] may be suppos’d to be founded; and as these must be deriv’d either from *knowledge* or *probability*, let us cast our eye on each of these degrees of evidence, and see whether they afford any just conclusion of this nature.’ (T 89) By ‘knowledge’ Hume means *a priori* knowledge, and by ‘probability’ he means belief derived from experience. His plan is to show that PUN (a) cannot be known *a priori*, and (b) cannot non-circularly be founded on reasoning from experience.

The first part of the argument, (a), is easy, and simply involves a second appeal to the Conceivability Principle. Since we can easily imagine a change in the course of nature, it is possible that PUN is false, and so it cannot be known *a priori*.

As for (b), Hume says:

We have said that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect; that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must evidently be going in a circle. (E 35-6)

In other words, *all* our ‘experimental conclusions’ (that is, beliefs that are founded on reasoning from experience or ‘probable arguments’) presuppose PUN. Hence PUN cannot *itself* be founded on reasoning from experience, because such reasoning presupposes that very principle. (I shall claim below, however, that Hume’s complaint here makes better sense when the argument from (P1-3) to (C) is construed as a possible method for forming, rather than justifying, beliefs.)

Hume presents a similar argument against the claim that reasoning from causes to effects proceeds via appeal to an unknown ‘power of production’, present in the cause, which guarantees the occurrence of the effect (*T* 90-92 and *E* 36-8). Grant, for the sake of the argument, that past experience of the constant conjunction of *C*s and *E*s gives us reason to believe in the *past* presence, in *C*s, of the ‘power’ to produce *E*s. Even so, without presupposing PUN, there is no foundation for the required inference to ‘the current *C* has the power to produce an *E*’, and so no foundation for the inference to the occurrence of the effect.

That completes Hume’s argument – after which he proceeds to provide what he calls a ‘sceptical solution’ to the problem he has been discussing, which is his well-known claim that causal reasoning in fact arises merely as a matter of ‘Custom or Habit’ (*E* 43) or a ‘principle of association’ (*T* 93).

The justification vs. the genesis of belief

The standard interpretation of Hume’s discussion of causal reasoning is that he really is raising – and pronouncing insoluble – the Problem of Induction, that is, the problem of *justifying* our beliefs about the unobserved. Hence his ‘solution’ is merely a ‘sceptical solution’: it is not supposed to undermine inductive scepticism, but only to excuse our reliance on induction on the grounds that we cannot help ourselves, our psychological mechanisms being what they are. However, this interpretation is increasingly regarded as controversial. Some interpreters have argued that Hume’s intention in his discussion of causal reasoning is merely to show that causal reasoning is not *a priori* reasoning (see for example Flew 1961 and Stove 1965) – something that does not require him to view causal reasoning as unjustified. Others have argued that his aim is to show that belief in the unobserved does not *in fact* arise as a matter of some process of argument *about* causal reasoning (see for example Garrett 1997 and Noonan 1999).

My own view is that this latter interpretation is closer to the mark, in that it correctly construes the issue Hume is concerned with as a psychological rather than an epistemological issue. The fact that Hume’s stated project, as described in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, is a ‘science of man’ (*T* xvi), provides one reason to think that inductive scepticism is not on his agenda. After all, according to an inductive sceptic, a ‘science of man’ could only deliver completely unwarranted conclusions. The traditional interpretation of his ‘sceptical solution’ – that it excuses, in some sense, our reliance on causal reasoning by showing it to be psychologically mandatory – does not help here, since indulging in ‘experimental philosophy’ of the kind Hume pursues in his science of man is not itself psychologically mandatory. Hume appears both to endorse the experimental method and to regard its pursuit as a distinctly optional enterprise.

I believe that Hume’s primary interest in his discussion of causal reasoning is the *origin of belief*. When I have an impression as of, say, depressing the brake pedal, what is the process or mechanism by which I thereby come to believe that the car will slow down? One way in which beliefs can be formed is via *a priori* reasoning: if I start with the belief that Jane has three apples and June has two apples, I can infer *a priori* – and hence come to believe – that Jane has more apples than June. But Hume shows that reasoning from causes to effects is not *a priori* reasoning, so belief in the effect, given the impression of the cause, cannot come about in that way. How, then, *does* belief in the effect come about? Crucially, the question here is a general question: not, ‘how did this particular belief come about?’ but ‘how does belief *in general* come about?’. We come into the world with no

beliefs about any matter of fact that is not present to our senses, but we end up with plenty; how does this happen?

On this interpretation of the question Hume wants to answer, the problem with the argument invoking PUN is not that it is circular in a justificatory sense, but that it is circular in an *explanatory* sense: the argument from (P1-3) to (C) fails not as an argument one might give in an attempt to justify belief in (C), but as an attempt to provide a model for the formation of belief in general. Hume thinks he has already explained the origin of *a priori* knowledge, through his account of reasoning concerning 'relations of ideas' (*T* 69-73). So if PUN were knowable *a priori*, belief in the effect could come about as a result of *a priori* inference from (P1) (an item of memory), (P2) (an impression) and (P3) (an item of knowledge): the mechanism that generates belief would have as input only mental items whose origins Hume takes himself already successfully to have explained. But PUN is not knowable *a priori*, so its status must be that of a *belief*. But in that case, appeal to PUN is useless in an explanation of how beliefs *in general* arise, for the alleged belief-generating mechanism – the inference from (P1-3) to (C) – itself takes a belief as part of the input. So it can only explain how we can come to have some *particular* belief once we already have *other* beliefs.

The only negative epistemological consequence that Hume intends to draw from his discussion of causal reasoning, on this interpretation, is that causal reasoning cannot be justified by (because it cannot be a result of) *a priori* inference from premises that are known either *a priori* or on the basis of immediate sensory experience. Thus he does not, in his discussion of causal reasoning, intend to raise the issue of whether it can be justified empirically at all. Indeed, he appears to simply take it for granted that it can be, and frequently refers to causal reasoning as a 'just' form of reasoning.

In fact, I think Hume offers a reliabilist justification of induction, when he says the following (see Beebe 2006: 66-74 for further discussion):

Had not the presence of an object instantly excited the idea of those objects, commonly conjoined with it, all our knowledge must have been limited to the narrow sphere of our memory and senses; and we should never have been able to adjust means to ends, or employ our natural powers, either to the producing of good, or avoiding of evil ... As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated; so has she implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects. (*E* 55)

But manifestly (and surely this will have been manifest to Hume himself) no reliabilist justification will meet the demands of the sceptic, for of course it depends on the claim that the past reliability of inductive inference gives us grounds for thinking that it will continue to be reliable – just the form of inference that Hume takes us to have no *a priori* grounds for trusting.

The upshot so far is this. Hume's discussion of causal reasoning is not even *intended* to address the traditional (since Hume) sceptical Problem of Induction. At this stage, Hume has offered us a psychological account of the mechanism by which we form beliefs about the unobserved. And he thinks the deployment of this mechanism is entirely legitimate, despite the fact that his justificatory story clearly fails to provide *a priori* grounds for continued faith in the mechanism's ability to deliver true beliefs.

4. Hume's response to the inductive sceptic

We are still left with a question: what *exactly* is Hume's attitude to inductive scepticism? It would seem that

Hume thinks *both* that the inductive sceptic's challenge to provide a non-circular justification for inductive inference cannot be met, *and* that there is no need for it to be met – that the sceptic's complaint doesn't impugn the status of causal reasoning as a legitimate form of inference. But there is an obvious lacuna here: *why* is there no need to meet the sceptic's challenge? Why does the impossibility of providing a non-circular justification of causal reasoning *not* impugn its legitimacy?

We can, I think, disentangle three distinct elements to Hume's answer. The first – which is implicit in his overall position rather than something he explicitly states – is just this. Suppose we start out not in the grip of the Image of God doctrine, but with a conception of human beings as animals: highly cognitively sophisticated animals, but animals nonetheless, to be categorised on the side of dogs and apes rather than God and angels. Given this starting-point, we should expect our epistemic access to the world to be a more sophisticated version of that available to dogs, and not a *less* sophisticated version of that available to God. And we should therefore simply not have expected at the outset to be able to attain *a priori* access to the causal structure of the world – something that God presumably manages, but dogs certainly don't. So the demonstration that, indeed, we cannot attain *a priori* access to the causal structure of the world really isn't something that should come as a surprise: it should not strike us as a failure to live up to an epistemic ideal that we might antecedently have hoped to achieve. Any such hope vanishes along with the view that our fundamental nature is quasi-divine rather than animal.

This line of thought, I think, goes along with the thought that the sceptic's very high standards in her demand for justification are simply inappropriate standards: we should not regard ourselves as serious cognitive failures for failing to meet those standards, when our meeting them was never a realistic expectation in the first place. If we set our sights lower – if we take our animal nature as given, and *then* ask whether there might be better and worse ways of forming beliefs, we will end up with a division between justified and unjustified beliefs that actually has a corrective purpose: we can sensibly attempt to discard the unjustified beliefs and replace them with justified ones.

The second and third elements to his response can be seen in action in this passage from the first *Enquiry*:

For here is the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer ... a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. (*E* 159–60)

One strand in Hume's response here concerns the kind of scepticism that positively recommends the actual doubting of everything that is dubitable. Hume's response to this kind of scepticism has two parts. First, it is, as a matter of empirical fact, impossible to follow the sceptic's recommendation: it will not have 'any constant influence on the mind'. We might just about be able to suspend belief in the external world, or in stable relationships of cause and effect, while cogitating in our studies. But as soon as we leave the study and interact with the world around us, such doubt is simply impossible to sustain. Try going to the shop to buy some milk without forming any positive expectations at all about what's going to happen next. You'll fail. Pretty much everything you do is explicable only by appealing to expectations. Why are you heading for the supermarket rather than the shoe shop? Because that's where you expect milk to be sold. Why did you bring money? Because you expect it not to turn into carrots on the way, and you expect to be able to get the milk only in exchange

for cash. Why did you just put your left foot in front of, rather than behind, your right foot? Why did you wait to cross the road rather than stepping in front of that bus? And so on.

Second, suppose that *is* possible to suspend belief wholesale. Then, Hume thinks, if we actually *did* it, we'd surely perish in no time. If we genuinely had no expectations at all, we'd never do *anything*. We wouldn't even eat; after all, if you had no expectation that the sandwich you just made would nourish you, why would you eat it rather than not – or, come to that, rather than eating the furniture?

Either way, then, wholesale doubt simply isn't an option. Either we can't do it, or we can do it but doing it would be incredibly bad for us.

The third and final element in Hume's response to scepticism connects with the failure of the Pyrrhonian recommendation to suspend belief. Suppose the sceptic accepts Hume's point here, but tries to maintain that, nonetheless, the expectations we form are – while psychologically or perhaps merely practically necessary – lacking in justification. As we already saw, I think Hume takes issue with this claim. But setting that aside, he has another response up his sleeve, which is this: what, exactly, would be the *point* in asserting our beliefs to be unjustified, if not to recommend suspending them? We can think of scepticism of this kind as a kind of merely intellectual position – one that is not supposed to have any ramifications for practical action. But this, Hume thinks, is mere intellectual posturing. When we consider which philosophical principles we ought to abide by, in Hume's book we are asking how we should live our lives, and not merely which principles we are entitled to assert in the philosophy classroom or in books that we write.

This, I think, is the implicit remaining option in Hume's question to the sceptic, when he asks, '*What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?*'. In effect, someone who is, as it were, a sceptic in theory but not in practice isn't proposing *anything*. There may be no answer to the sceptic of this kind; but his reasoning simply does not deserve to be taken seriously because he makes no recommendations for how we should live. The failure of scepticism of this kind is not that it deploys false assumptions or fallacious reasoning; it is rather a failure to provide any positive, livable answer to the question, 'what ought we to believe?' (since the answer, 'nothing,' is clearly not livable). The sceptic's mistake is thus to have downed tools before finishing the philosophical job.

Conclusion: the methodological role of scepticism in Hume

There are many respects in which Hume's philosophy is diametrically opposed to Descartes. One thing I have rather obliquely been trying to establish is that the lack of methodological centrality of sceptical issues is one such respect. For Descartes, scepticism plays a central role: it is the spectre of the evil demon that provides the springboard for the Cogito and the subsequent justificatory account of our beliefs about the external world and indeed our own powers of reasoning. If we read Hume's discussion of causal reasoning as raising the sceptical Problem of Induction, then we might conclude that scepticism is central to Hume's project too: after all, thus understood, it is his 'sceptical solution' to that problem that reveals the basis of all our reasoning concerning matters of fact to be mere 'custom or habit'.

By contrast, I've argued that scepticism is simply not on Hume's agenda in his discussion of causal reasoning. Hume is interested in scepticism, but it is noteworthy that he addresses scepticism explicitly right at the end of both Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. His overall epistemological position, then, has consequences for scepticism – but consideration of scepticism is not – as it is for Descartes – the springboard from which that position is motivated and developed.

Nonetheless, Hume's attitude towards scepticism is not only complex and difficult, and worthy of much greater attention than I have given it here; it also serves to highlight some of the central aspects of his philosophical

position – in particular, his opposition to the Image of God doctrine. More importantly, it sheds light on his view about what philosophy should hope to achieve. Hume famously says, in the very last line of the first *Enquiry*, that most books on divinity and metaphysics should be consigned to the flames, ‘for they contain nothing but sophistry and illusion’ – that is, they rely on deeply flawed reasoning. The sceptic, Hume thinks, does *not* rely on deeply flawed reasoning. Nonetheless, I think his attitude to the proper home for works defending scepticism is much the same. Certainly he thinks no good can come of them. But I think he thinks it’s worse than that (and this is a point that has significant contemporary resonance, at least in some countries): they are positively pernicious, in promoting philosophical principles that have no practical application, and therefore conceiving philosophy itself as a discipline with no significance for how we should live our lives. So I think his view would be that they should be consigned to the flames too.

Bibliography

- Beebe, H. (2006) *Hume on Causation*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Buckle, S. (2001) *Hume’s Enlightenment Tract*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Craig, E. (1987) *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Flew, A. (1961) *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Garrett, D. (1997) *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Howson, C. (2000) *Hume’s Problem: Induction and the Justification of Belief*, Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hume, D. (1739–40) (*T*), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby–Bigge, 2nd edition, revised and ed. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1978).
- (1748) (*E*), *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in D. Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (1748/51), ed. L.A. Selby–Bigge, 3rd edition, revised and ed. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1975).
- Noonan, H. (1999) *Hume on Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- Stove, D. C. (1965) ‘Hume, Probability, and Induction’, *Philosophical Review* 74, 160–77.