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The Naturalistic Epistemology of Hume and Wittgenstein

Dawit Dame

Introduction

David Hume is well known for his skepticism on a wide range of topics, such as causation, the existence of a world external to the mind and the existence of an enduring self. As a result of this, the negative aspect of Hume's philosophy often clouds the extent to which he wants to ground his epistemology in positive natural facts about humans. Wittgenstein never read Hume and nowhere is it evident that Hume had any influence on Wittgenstein's works. Perhaps the only influence Hume had on Wittgenstein is simply being a philosopher of a certain tradition that Wittgenstein primarily sought to question. Wittgenstein like Hume, however, is committed the view that human knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, is ultimately grounded in natural facts about human beings.

In this paper I will identify and discuss Hume's and Wittgenstein's naturalism and argue that both Wittgenstein and Hume seek to ground human knowledge on empirical natural facts about humans. In drawing the parallel between them, I will begin by discussing their respective negative views on knowledge and then focus on those positive views that in each case point towards a naturalism in their philosophy. Since both Wittgenstein and Hume wrote on a wide range of topics, I will only focus on certain important aspects of their philosophy to serve as a tool for understanding their naturalistic philosophical projects. I will particularly focus on Hume's writing on causation and Wittgenstein's view on understanding and rule following.

1. The Negative View

1.1 *Determine?*

I use the term “negative” primarily to serve as a general term to an aspect of Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s philosophy to what some might refer to as skepticism.¹ The views discussed below are negative in a sense that they emphasize *what is not* rather than *what is*. Since the purpose of this paper is to discuss Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s naturalism, I will briefly discuss some of their negative views only in so far as it serves to illuminate their naturalistic views. To a large extent, very few consider Wittgenstein a skeptic, but skepticism is a term that is often associated with Hume’s writing on causality. I will briefly underline how Hume is not essentially a skeptic and how his naturalism is distinct from skepticism for Hume later on.

An aspect of Hume’s philosophy that is considered negative is his view on causality, particularly, the inference from the observed to the unobserved.² Hume in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* classifies “all object of human reason or inquiry” into two kinds: *relation of ideas* and *matters of fact* (E, 25). He explains that *relations of ideas* are the kind that are *demonstrative*. Demonstrative in

¹ Wittgensteinian scholarship since the publication of Saul Kripke’s “*Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*”, has been divided into pre-Kripke and post Kripke analysis. It is fair to say that Kripke is the first to make an explicit analogy between Hume and Wittgenstein. However, his analogy that compares Hume’s skepticism along with his skeptical solution to Wittgenstein, has received wide array of criticism. My goal in this paper is to discuss Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s naturalism with respect to their “negative” views, and I do not intend to address the finer points of a Kripkean comparison of the two.

² Barry Stroud, *Hume* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977), 42.

the sense that their negation implies a contradiction. These, as Hume points out, are the type that we find in “sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic”. For instance, the proposition “[t]hat the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the two sides...” (E, 25) is a form demonstrative reasoning. According to Hume, “the certainty and evidence of” the relation of ideas holds “though there never were a circle or triangle in nature”. (E, 25). Matters of fact, on the other hand are propositions whose negation does not lead to a contradiction. A proposition that claims “[t]hat the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation that *it will rise.*” (E, 25-26).

Hume asserts that “all reasoning concerning matter of fact seems to be founded on the relation of cause and effect”—after observing events of type A and type B, we infer B to follow from a single event A. Essentially, multiple constant conjunctions between events form the basis of inference from an observed single event A to the unobserved event B. Hume points out that matters of fact reasoning by their very nature take the form of a chain of justifications. Within the realm of *posteriori* reasoning, a reason given for a certain event C is based on a fact B and the reason for the fact B is followed by a fact A. A present event C is justified by a chain of inter-temporal reasoning that extends backward into the past. A reasoning of this nature, therefore, relies on “the relation of cause and effect and that this relation is near or remote, direct or collateral.” (E. 27). A reasoning of this kind is *posteriori* because one cannot establish the connection between cause and effect without necessarily having had an experience where a series of events A are followed by events B. It follows logically that cause and effects could not be “discovered by a priori

arguments.” Therefore, “every effect is a distinct event from its cause” and any “conception” of its cause through a priori argument “must be entirely arbitrary.” (E, 29).

What is at stake here is the idea of *necessary* connection between events A and B. Hume wants to say that there is nothing to be discovered, even with the employment of demonstrative reasoning, that from an observed event A the unobserved event B *necessarily* follows. There is no necessary connection between a cause and its effect; it is impossible to infer any specific effect from just a single instance of the cause. Only through repeated observations of events A being followed by events B can we infer B having observed A.

Wittgenstein’s negative view could be illustrated based on instances of his views on understanding. The idea of rule following is embedded in what is considered human understanding. Our notion of understanding entails grasping a certain rule or direction and properly following it in all circumstances considered. But what does it *really* mean to understand, to follow a rule, Wittgenstein asks? Wittgenstein imagines a scenario where A is writing a series of numbers and B tries to guess what comes next by coming up with a formula:

But are the processes which I have just described here *understanding*? “B understands the principle of the series” surely doesn’t mean simply: the formula “ $a_n = \dots$ ” occurs to B. For it is perfectly imaginable that the formula should occur to him and that he should nevertheless not understand. “He understands” must have more in it than: the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those

more or less characteristic *accompaniments* or manifestations of understanding. (PI 152).

Here Wittgenstein points to an important aspect of *what we take* to be understanding. The use of the word “occur” is supposed to signify that understanding might be thought of as a form of mental picture that comes to mind. However, this is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for understanding since it is imaginable that the formula could appear in his mind but he may not *understand* in the sense that the subject still might not be able to continue with the series. In short, the picture fails to *determine* his future use. Wittgenstein therefore considers the possibility that understanding must be more than the apparent “manifestations” or “accompaniments” of understanding, such as the occurrence of a formula in the head. The latter point is fleshed out in another passage:

Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule. And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule. (PI 218).

This picture of rules as rails is a metaphor that captures our ordinary conception of understanding of a rule. When we understand a rule, it is assumed that future applications of it could be *read off*, so to say, from it, the rails serving as future applications of the rule. Thus, we would be inclined to say that we can *use* a concept at any point in time t_n in the future. But how does a rule *contain* its application? Wittgenstein presents this perplexity in a rather ‘absurd’ situation where “a person naturally reacted to the

gesture of pointing “by looking in the direction of the line from the finger-tip to the wrist, not from the wrist to finger-tip.”. Signs like pointing with a finger, according to Wittgenstein, are apt to be interpreted and understood in an infinite number of ways; thus, signs, rules, concepts, formulas do not inherently *contain* their future applications.

Could understanding be an *interpretation* of a rule? Wittgenstein retorts, “any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support.”(PI 190). An interpretation is merely a substitution of one sign post for another. Interpretations stand in need of further interpretations leading to an infinite regress.

Put simply, when it comes to understanding we are on our own. Understanding according to the above discussion is a kind of a jab in the dark for there is nothing about rules that determine our correct application of them at any point in time. Just as Hume found no necessary connection between two events A and B, such that the occurrence of B is *determined* by the occurrence of A. Wittgenstein found nothing in the rule being followed that determines its future applications. “Thus, we think of future or possible use as present ‘in a queer way’, by being *already contained* in what the mind does when something is meant – in particular, by being conscious after the manner of an image.”³ Wittgenstein’s problem of meaning and understanding is thus summarized:

³ Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 9. Also consider this from *Philosophical Investigations*. “we say, for example, that a machine has (possesses) such-and-such possibilities of movement; we speak of the ideally rigid machine which can only move in such-and-such a way.—What is this possibility of movement? It is not the movement, but it does not seem to be the mere physical conditions, for moving either—as, that there is play between socket and

We are tempted to think that the action of language consists of two parts: an inorganic part--the handling of signs—and an organic part, which we may call understanding these signs, meaning them, interpreting them. These latter activities seems to take place in a queer medium, the mind. The mechanism of the mind-- the nature of which, it seems, we don't quite understand—can bring about effects that no material mechanism could. (BB, p.3)

Hume, however, departs from Wittgenstein in one major way. Hume believed that if a necessary connection is not to be found in the relation between objects, it is to be looked for, and perhaps be found in, human subjects. A careful empirical study of human psychology, Hume believed, would reveal the ground of this idea of causal determination. Hume thought that the empirical study of the human mind would reveal the *origins* of why we think that there is a necessary connection between events A and B. As the last sentence of the above quote indicates, Wittgenstein has a more radical form of negative view. He believes that even an empirical study of the human mind will not reveal the answer; it is a fruitless effort trying to find it in the “inner” as opposed to the “outer” material world.⁴ It must be

pin not fitting too tight in the socket. For while this is the empirical condition for movement, one could also imagine it to be otherwise. The possibility of a movement is, rather, supposed to be like a shadow? And by shadow I do not mean some picture of the movement---for such a picture would not have to be a picture of just this movement. But the possibility of this movement must be the possibility of just this movement. (See how high the seas of language run here!)”

⁴ Wittgenstein will not deny that there are natural, psychological associations we make in the realm of meaning and understanding. He

stressed, however, that Wittgenstein here has a Cartesian conception of the “inner” as opposed to the material mechanism by which the mind works as far as questions of understanding are concerned. Even an over emphasis of the latter is of grave concern to Wittgenstein.

1.2 The Negative and its challenges

Assuming that the negative view thus presented above paints a picture of skepticism, any attempt to answer Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s challenge must tell us *why* our reasoning takes the form it does at arriving at conclusions about causation, understanding and meaning. Moreover, a philosophically satisfactory answer to the question *why* must meet the following three conditions⁵: It must

1. explain our unshakable conviction in our ordinary world view
2. establish the impossibility of providing our world view with a rational justification
3. explain 1 and 2 without making it appear that “our everyday conviction is hasty or dogmatic, or involves some kind of error, illusion, mistake, or make-believe.”⁶

will disagree with Hume, however, in that the concept of understanding, the logical understanding is to be found in the mental. See. McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, 4-5.

⁵ These conditions have been adopted from Martin Bell and Mary McGinn, “Skepticism and Naturalism.” *Philosophy*, 65, No.254(1990), 408.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 408.

2. The Positive View

2.1 What do I mean by “naturalism”?

Naturalism is a term employed in a variety of ways in philosophy. It is difficult thus to find an all-encompassing definition of naturalism in philosophy.⁷ In contemporary philosophy it is often used to align philosophical views with empirical science. What is essential about these definitions is that in all of them the word ‘naturalism’ denotes what could be investigated with our present scientific tools, in contrast to the “supernatural”. Outside these contemporary debates and in the spirit of Wittgenstein’s philosophy I will attempt to find what naturalism means in the way it has been *used* in Wittgenstein’s and Hume’s writings.⁸

Hume and Wittgenstein dedicate a large portion of their philosophy to addressing the negative challenge posed by their respective philosophies. Within their philosophical

⁷ For some of the debate in contemporary definitions of naturalism see, the debate between Quine and Stroud (W.V.O. Quine, *Epistemology Naturalized*. In *Naturalizing Epistemology*. Ed. by Hilary Kornblith (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1994); Barry, Stroud *The Significance of Naturalized Epistemology*. Midwest Studies in Philosophy vol. VI The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy. Ed. by Peter A. French et al. (Minneapolis MN: Minnesota Press, 1981)

⁸ Wittgenstein often emphasized the use of words in ordinary language to mean different things at different times. Different usage of the same word created what he called family resemblances; family resemblances gave us a sense of what a word meant in general through a series of overlapping similarities. Consider the beginning of a speech he gave on Ethics to the London Heretics Society in 1929, “...And to make you see the subject matter of Ethics I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for the above definition, and by enumerating them I want to produce the same sort of effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate...”

framework, they attempt to give a naturalistic explanation that is in accord with the above three requirements. Considered holistically this naturalistic view recognizes the limitations presented to our philosophical selves by our biological selves. As humans we are capable of observing the world “from outside” and at the same time unquestioningly follow nature. Hume recognized the limitations of being a human animal in his philosophy and sought to study the interaction between our animalistic and instinctual being and our reflective rational being. According to Stroud, “the real philosophical value of Humean study of human nature lies in neither position on its own, but in the illumination gained from the constant and inevitable passing to and fro between” nature and philosophy⁹. For Wittgenstein, the limitation is primarily manifested in the extent to which language could be used to serve the demands of philosophy. Some of the questions philosophy asks for are simply not linguistically feasible. After all, “a tea cup will only hold a tea cup full of water [even if] I were to pour out a gallon over.”¹⁰

Wittgenstein and Hume were both preoccupied with the question of precisely where this limitation is to be found in nature but it is also an area of difference between them. Wittgenstein holds the view that this limitation lies in our primitive *capacity* to be trained.¹¹ Hume is interested in giving what Stroud calls a “causal theory about the origins of our beliefs in causality”. Hume’s theory is naturalistic in a

⁹ Stroud, *Hume*, 249.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lectures on Ethics.” In *Philosophical Occasions*, edited by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 40.

¹¹ McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, 168.

sense that he sought to find the answer regarding causality in the human subject.

Let us take an instance of Wittgenstein's writing to illustrate what is meant by "natural". The most illuminating meaning of the word natural in Wittgenstein's writing appears in *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*. In a number of similar instances, Wittgenstein employs the word "natural" to emphasize its *primitive* and *foundational* characteristics. Wittgenstein, for instance, talks about a group of people engaged in creating arithmetic. Suppose that there is a technique for counting but not multiplication yet. Suppose also that these mathematicians invent multiplication for numbers up to 100. If a person well trained in the technique of multiplication, for the very first time, is asked to complete the multiplication of two numbers higher than 100, say, 112 and 200, we assume that he will probably do what we would expect of him and produce the right answer. Wittgenstein goes on to say, "this is an experiment—and one which we may later adopt as a calculation. What does that mean? Well, suppose that 90 per cent do it all one way. I say, "This is now going to be the right result." The experiment was to show that the most *natural* (italics mine) way is—which way most of them go. Now everybody is taught to do it—and *now* there is right and wrong. Before there was not." (LFM, 95).

For Wittgenstein "naturalism" is the primitive behavior we exhibit in our *untrained* self and it lies *on the surface*. By "on the surface" I mean that given the multiplicity of meaning that could be derived from statement or a rule (the negative view) there is no 'inner' meaning that could be found in the rule. This idea has been well illustrated in, but not restricted to, his famous Private Language Argument. What essentially separates me, say, for a parrot,

is not some “queer” mental phenomenon that takes place inside my head when questions of understanding are raised. It is rather my *ability* to express meaning and understanding through use of examples and practical activities. Does this imply that the parrot could be made to behave like me if we *train* it? Wittgenstein’s answer would be no. A parrot does not have the natural capacities required for that form of training. By the same token, our “untrained” self would be one that meets the minimum requirement. He wants to divorce our association of knowledge, what determines correctness and incorrectness, from a private mental phenomenon. As to the question of *how* humans come to have this minimum requirement, he would leave it to biologist or the psychologist.

The idea of naturalism for Hume, however, is to be found in the mental. If we cannot find the idea of necessary connection with two successive events, we must find it in the observer.¹²

Since, therefore, external objects as they appear to the senses, give us no idea of power or necessary connexion, by their operation in particular instances, let us see, whether this idea be derived from reflection on the operations of our own minds, and be copied from any internal impression. (*E*, 64)

After observing two successive events A and B regularly, we form the idea of necessary connection in our mind; we form a belief. The process of forming this belief comes to us ‘naturally’ because it is commonplace that “by the simple command of our will, we can move the organs of our body,

¹² Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1949).

or direct the faculties of our mind.”(E, 64). Thus, we can say that one thing is ‘naturally’ related to another if the thought of the first leads to the belief that the associated second will ‘causally’ follow.¹³ *Resemblance, contiguity* and *causation* produce association between two events in our mind. Upon encountering a picture of a friend, “our idea of him is evidently enlivened by the resemblance [and] in producing this effect, there concur both a relation and a present impression.”(E, 51). At the same time, proximity in space and time, contiguity, allows us to make an inter-temporal causal inference between two objects. When I’m getting close to home, through contiguity, I can make the inference between my *impressions* of home (original idea) and my present state of mind, because contiguity affords me “superior vivacity” in understanding the causal interaction between the two. Consequently, Hume provides what he termed as the “natural” definition of cause and effect:

A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other. (T, 170).

Most importantly, Hume wants to say that this “natural” definition of cause is equivalent to a “philosophical” definition of cause.¹⁴ For him, both are ways of “simply presenting a different view of the same

¹³ Stroud, *Hume*, 89.

¹⁴ Stroud, *Hume*; Robinson, “Hume’s Two Definitions of “Cause””, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 12, No.47(1962); Roberts, “Hume’s Two Definitions of “Cause””, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 15, No.60(1965) doubt that he fully succeeds in equivocating these two.

object...[and] we may substitute [one for the other]”.(T, 170).

We may define a CAUSE to be ‘An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac’d in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter. ‘(T, 170).

The philosophical definition is supposed to encompass all “objective relations that hold between the things that we designate as causes and effects.”¹⁵ Hume’s attempt in equating these two definitions is consistent with his philosophical project of studying human behavior, including our philosophical behavior and finding explanations to philosophical questions in human psychology.

Here then is the only expedient, from which we can hope for success in our philosophical researches, to leave the tedious lingering method, which we have hitherto followed, and instead of taking now and then a castle or village on the frontier, to march up directly to the capital or center of these sciences, to human nature itself; which being once masters of, we may every where else hope for an easy victory. (T, introduction, XX).

Hume sought to study the science of man grounded in nature and aspired to provide to philosophy what Newton did for science.¹⁶ He wanted to address philosophical questions not merely through “hypothesis”, but through the empirical

¹⁵ Stroud, *Hume*, 88-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

study of humans in their natural habitat. If science formulates theories from simple hypotheses, such as what we commonly or naturally observe, then Hume might have reasoned that our natural behavior could provide us a way to formulate explanations of the relation between two events A and B related through resemblance, contiguity and cause-effect.¹⁷ As sentient beings, we collect data through the senses and this immediate sensual input is what he called *impressions*. From these impressions we form *ideas*, impression accompanied by inference. Pure inferences that we derive from ideas are strictly speaking knowledge—the impossibility of perceiving anything differently.¹⁸ In Hume’s natural realm, there is nothing distinctly different about the two different definitions; they are both different ways of approaching the same subject without one being necessarily superior. Thus, Hume’s Naturalism formulates a fundamental, but empirical principle of the human mind: an observed constant conjunction between events A and B fixes a “union in the imagination” such that the thought of A naturally leads the mind to the thought of B.

Questions of whether Hume’s two definitions of causes are “definitions” in the philosophically satisfactory sense of the word aside, an important point could be glimpsed here that draws a parallel with Wittgenstein’s idea of naturalism. If Wittgenstein had left his idea at the

¹⁷ Robinson, *Hume’s Two Definitions of “Cause”*, 165.

¹⁸ Stroud, *Hume*, (78) says, “for every idea there must be an impression, or impressions, from which that idea is derived...” and that Hume searches of the source of the idea of necessary connection in the impression they could have been deduced from. However, Hume does not find impressions directly responsible for our ideas of necessary connection and concludes that the mind is “determined” to form the idea of necessary connection from repeated conjoined events.

doorstep of naturalism, then Hume's job is to take it inside. In other words, Hume's idea of naturalism sought to account for the psychological phenomenon Wittgenstein did not think worth going into. However, just as Wittgenstein thought that our natural disposition provides a foundation for mathematical theories and their subsequent criteria for their correct or wrong use, Hume also believed that the basis for the idea of a necessary connection is to be found in our naturally formed beliefs about association of events. Both agree that the answers to their negative views are to be found in our primitive epistemological behavior; the disagreement lies, if any, at the level of *primitive-ness*. In the sections below, I will develop this idea further and assess how it accounts for Hume's and Wittgenstein's negative views.

2.2 How does Naturalism account for the problems raised in the negative view:

The challenges posed by the negative view can be answered by arguing that 1.) It is nature not reason that is the ultimate foundation of all our factual beliefs, 2.) seeking a rational justification for our "naturalistic" reasoning is unwarranted, and 3.) we have an epistemic right to our naturalistic justifications. How does naturalism, as discussed above manifest, itself in addressing the negative concerns of Hume and Wittgenstein?

2.2.1 Nature as a foundation of our factual beliefs

It comes in a form of *habit* or *custom* that, after succession of similar events, we form an idea of necessary connection, according to Hume. The precise mechanics of how this idea of necessity is formed lies in the *tendency* of the mind to be "determined" by such things as resemblance

and contiguity to form the idea of “necessity and power.” This creates “a great propensity[in the mind] to spread itself on external objects” and ascribe necessity to them. Necessity therefore is

“...the effect of this observation, and it is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry out thoughts from one object to another.” (T, 165) as well as, “...something that exists in the mind not objects; nor is it possible for us to ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality in bodies.”(T, 165-6).

It must be noted that when Hume says that necessity is something that is found in the mind, neither does he mean that causality is strictly an ‘inner’ process and no such thing as causality in the world, nor that objects of the world are causally linked as a result of our minds.¹⁹ He means that certain mental processes get triggered in the mind, in the empirical sense, that ascribe necessity to objects.

Hume makes an analogy between necessity and Lockean secondary qualities to reinforce his point that necessity is something that exists neither in the physical world nor in the mental.

Thus, as certain sounds and smells are always found to attend certain visible objects, we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and the qualities, tho’ the qualities of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction, and really exist nowhere.” (T, 167)

According to Hume, when we get a “feeling of determination” from observed conjunction between events,

¹⁹ Stroud, *Hume*, 81.

the mind projects itself on to the external world and this feeling of determination manifests itself in the form of necessity between two causal events. This is a fundamental fact about human nature.

Wittgenstein will support Hume in saying that regularity determines our convictions in our beliefs. A regular use of a word (or rule) determines its future application. “The repeated use that is required for there to be meaning is something spread out over time; meaning is, so to say, an essentially *diachronic concept*.”²⁰ There are also numerous occasions where Wittgenstein talks about *use*, *custom* and *practice* as a foundation of knowledge and understanding. He believes that there are primitive instinctual faculties we possess before all knowledge of facts. The systemization of these primitive instincts establishes what we call “empirical facts”. Our custom or habit is thus a systematic categorization of what is intelligible and what is not. We begin to establish what is true and what is not from a collective system of what Wittgenstein frequently referred to as “a form of life”.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (PI, 241)

How do words refer to sensations?—There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about

²⁰ McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, 37, draws on an interesting example of the “Two Minute England” taken from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* to illustrate the point that a temporally truncated words like the “two minute England” are meaningless.

sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connexion set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word “pain” for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child pain-behavior. (PI, 244)

Groaning, moaning or crying are primitive pre-linguistic behavior that “the language-game with ‘pain’ is rooted, not in observation of private objects in an ethereal realm.”²¹ We don’t ask a child why he is crying we simply proceed to comfort him in the same way we do not question the unmannered behavior of an untrained dog. Expressions such “I have hurt myself”, “He’s in terrible pain” develop as “learned extensions” of the manifestations of primitive natural behavior.

2.2.2 Unwarranted rational justification of our “naturalistic” beliefs

Both Wittgenstein and Hume provide their positive views by an explicit acceptance of the impossibility of providing a rational justification for their negative projects. What is more important is that the negative view is only a *tool* used to shift our attention to the positive view. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* emphasizes that what is expressed in it is only a way, a “ladder” to be thrown away

²¹ P.M.S Hacker, *Wittgenstein Meaning and Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 192.

once we see “the world rightly”. This Wittgensteinian ladder is exactly the role given to their negative views; it is a way of forcing us see that the kind of factual justification we seek is mistaken.²²

At this juncture we can address the issue of whether Hume is essentially a skeptic and point out how his naturalism sets him apart from a thorough going skeptic.²³ At the end of the Treatise Book I part IV, Hume makes it clear that he is clearly not a skeptic.

Shou'd it be here asked me . . . whether I be really one of those skeptics who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in any thing possesst of any measure of truth and falsehood; I should reply that that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely of that opinion.

Hume's *skepticism*, especially with regard to causation and inductive reasoning could, at best, be described as “fallibilism”, the idea that our knowledge, in principle, could be mistaken. (One might also consider his critical stance on “metaphysics” a form of skepticism, which, it must be pointed out, is clearly different from *philosophical skepticism*).²⁴ Consequently, Hume's project, like Wittgenstein's, put in the right light, is not one that is dedicated to providing an answer to a skeptical project, but is rather an attempt to make us see that epistemological

²² *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it must be pointed out, expresses quite a different view of Wittgenstein on language and knowledge from the one under discussion here.

²³ The discussion of Hume and skepticism requires a full-length paper. I will only provide a brief outline here.

²⁴ Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/hume/>>.

justification we are seeking is to be found in our naturalistic dispositions.

Nature by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel... Whosoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total skeptic, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavor'd by this argument to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently planted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable."(T, 183)

In Wittgenstein's positive system, the rejection of the negative view is followed by a careful nullification at what first appears like a skeptical problem. The controversy surrounding Saul Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein (*Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*) has to do, to a large extent, with whether Wittgenstein could be seen as espousing "skeptical" views. Both sides of the debate will agree that, if he did, it is meant to show the kind of meaningful questions that could be asked. Bell and McGinn in *Naturalism and Skepticism* identify two essential characteristics of a negative challenge such as discussed above, which for convenience sake we can term as a skeptical challenge. The first of these is the skeptic's inability to find an objective world in experience as a source of our knowledge, and the second of these is the skeptic's identification of ordinary judgments as empirical claims that require independent evidence to be established as true. Wittgenstein finds these as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of ordinary practice. Wittgenstein repeatedly points out that the role of judgments in ordinary practice must not be taken out of context. It is easy fall into the trap of believing that "our system of judgments is uniformly epistemic." If I say, "I'm in pain", I find myself confronted

with the same epistemic justification as “I have a penny in my pocket”, two different claims that require different justifications.

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;--but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.(OC, 204).

Moreover, Wittgenstein thinks that answering to the skeptic’s challenge by looking for further evidence in experience is futile; it is to fall into the skeptics trap for experience itself is subject to many interpretations.

One wants to say "All my experiences show that it is so". But how do they do that? For that proposition to which they point itself belongs to a particular interpretation of them. "That I regard this proposition as certainly true also characterizes my interpretation of experience." (OC, 145).

The process of understanding or rule following then is not to be justified by appealing to a kind of justification that is independent of our ordinary practice and custom. To demonstrate our understanding is to engage in an activity such as pointing, giving examples, and acting in accordance with what is commonly accepted in a recognized language game. Understanding is a skill, just like swimming or playing chess, that is measured by how well we perform in a given circumstance.

Hume goes at great length both in the *Dialogues* and Book I of the *Treatise* into proving that we are incapable of seeing the world outside our natural states as humans and we hold on to two fundamental beliefs: 1.) objects of our

perception have an independent persistent reality, and 2.) nothing comes to existence without a pre-existing cause. All skeptical doubts concerning the validity of these beliefs do not target the truth or falsity of them rather they demonstrate the absence of evidence for them, which is taken as a proof of dogma. Hume believed that we lacked complete knowledge of the ultimate reality and the skeptical doubts carry no more weight than our naturalistic beliefs.²⁵ The employment of reason to justify or nullify our belief “diminish [each other]...till at last they both vanish away into nothing by a regular just diminution.”(T, 187). Thus, the negative view’s challenge is merely a pedantic requirement to qualify our naturalistic beliefs, and as far as our custom goes it is unwarranted.

2.2.3 Epistemic right to naturalistic beliefs

It follows from the above discussions that if justification is to be grounded in ordinary practice, we have an epistemic right to our system of judgments. The naturalistic view of Hume and Wittgenstein is thus an attempt to preserve our ordinary system of justification. Norman Smith Kemp in defending Hume’s naturalism states that “what we call ‘reason,’ and oppose to our natural beliefs is in reality nothing distinct from these beliefs; it is just the *de facto* necessity we are under of following them, which gives rise to the philosophical or ‘rational’ reaction against

²⁵ Norman Smith, “*The Naturalism of Hume(I).*” *Mind*, New Series, 14, No. 54 (1905), 166.

them.”²⁶ When we discard Hume’s naturalistic beliefs, we devolve into a Berkeleyian idealist where nothing exists outside the mind. When we take them too seriously, they lead us to “idle speculation” fueled by knowledge demanding a sufficient cause for all things.

This does not mean that Hume wants to throw away our rational way of seeking knowledge. He accepts that there is part of our existence that we share with animals and then there is a part of us that is rational, reflective, and introspective. The latter is to serve the former; it is to guide us in our quest for knowledge. Having the right to knowledge claims of the kind discussed above should not deter us from seeking true knowledge. This for Hume requires adapting a “two-fold philosophical discipline: a skeptical discipline to open [our] eyes to the deceptiveness of the mistaken endeavors of [the mind] and a positive naturalistic philosophy to mark out the paths upon which [we] can confidently travel without any such attempted violation of [our] human nature, and in furtherance of [our] essential needs.”²⁷

Language games are the key to Wittgenstein’s naturalistic epistemology. Language games are to serve as a reference to what we can consider as correct and incorrect. Wittgenstein’s slogan “don’t think but look” is really an attempt to draw attention back to a natural way of justifying and knowing as opposed to a “supernatural” (Platonic) way of looking an underlying reason to be found by a rigorous “thinking” devoid of ordinary practice. As Bell and McGinn rightly point out the non-rational base of our ordinary judgment has a particular role to play in our

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 132.

system of knowledge and that is practicality. “These judgments have been shown to have a role in our practice that makes the question of *establishing* them, justifying them, completely out of place.”²⁸

Evidently, both Hume and Wittgenstein were very critical of a particular way of doing philosophy. Wittgenstein opposed the Platonic sense of meaning and essence independent of our practice. He is often quoted for saying that philosophy does not provide thesis (and he did try not to have a thesis). The task of the philosopher is perhaps to clear up the mess and rearrange the some of the clatter and mess created by our practice, but not to discover truth. Hume has stressed that we should treat philosophy in “a careless manner” and markedly differed from his British predecessors in the way he approached ontology, epistemology and ethics.

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²⁸ Bell and McGinn, 416.

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