Introduction: a false reason or none at all

Hume's "dangerous dilemma"

Hume's survey of human understanding in *A Treatise of Human Nature* ends with a vertiginous descent into despair. "The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another" (*T*268). Reason, which putatively sets man apart from and above his fellow creatures, exposes itself as nothing but "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (*T*267); our sole and entire counterweight to "all the trivial suggestions of the fancy," which are so "often contrary to each other" and "lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity," is thus simply fancy in another guise. Worse, this ostensibly "rational" brand of imagination, "when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them with so sensible an impression, as we do those, which are more easy and natural" (*T*267f.). Human nature thus casts us into a nightmarish dilemma: sound reason can survive thanks only to a natural tendency to ignore its verdicts; yet to embrace this frivolousness as the principle of our reasoning is to "run into the most manifest absurdities" and so undermine sound reason. "We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all" (*T*268).[1]

The "dangerous dilemma" (*T*267) confronting humankind on account of our dependence on trivial suggestions of the fancy is merely one, and by no means the most telling, of the "manifold contradictions and imperfections" that led Hume to brand ours a *false* reason. The dilemma we face in reasoning according to the relation of cause and effect is perhaps the

most important. Of the "permanent, irresistable, and universal" principles of imagination, upon whose "removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin," the one closest to the heart of all reasoning and explanation bearing on matters of fact is "the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes" (*T*225). Without it, "Inference and reasoning concerning the operations of nature would, from that moment, be at an end; and the memory and senses remain the only canals, by which the knowledge of any real existence could possibly have access to the mind" (*E*VIII/i.64). The internal world of the mind (see *T*261) and the external world of bodies (see *T*73f., *T*108 and *T*237) would be beyond our powers of conception; even demonstrative reasoning (especially mathematics) would lose all connection with matters of fact and carry no weight whatever in our thoughts and actions (see *T*414). Yet ...

> how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir'd by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other? Such a discovery not only cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes; since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning. (*T*266f.)

Experience, in disclosing to us causal relations, grants us no insight into the nature or relations of the objects we perceive; it is merely the occasion of certain feelings within us. The sole and entire source of our idea of cause is simply an amalgam of the *ease* felt in the transition from an impression to an associated idea and the *vivacity* which then characterizes our contemplation of the idea ("'Tis here that the real power of causes is plac'd, along with their connexion and necessity ... the customary transition is, therefore, the same with the power and necessity," *T*166). The feelings of facility and vivacity are the natural response of the human psyche to the repeated observation (constant conjunction) of perceptions, and, as such, are fully as hostage to the peculiar constitution of human nature as, say, the kind of sensation we receive from the touch of a velvet cushion. Were our senses constituted differently, the light refracted by a rose might produce a sensation like the taste of pineapple (or no sensation at all, as happens presently with ultraviolet stimuli). Likewise, a differently constituted imagination might *not* be predisposed to associate constantly conjoined perceptions (i.e. feel ease in the transition) or, even if it were, might still not respond to ideas thus associated to impressions with belief (= vivacity). Given an idea-enlivening imagination with quite different "general and more establish'd properties," not only would it never

occur to us to ascribe objective significance to observed regularities, but also we might take no heed of them at all. We would attach significance to phenomena that, with our present natures, seem random and meaningless and pass unremarked.

The upshot of Hume's account of causal inference is that experiencing a world and seeing yellow are merely diverse expressions of basic animalian psychology; the one is no more capable than the other of yielding the least insight into independent realities ("all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation ... a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls," *T*103 and *T*179). Things we cannot help but believe and "must take for granted in our reasonings" (*T*187) – for example a cause to every beginning of existence, the existence of bodies – owe their immunity to doubt wholly to the fact that our imaginations are in thrall to the contingencies and blind dictates of human nature ("Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel," *T*183). We therefore entirely undermine human reason – "contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning" – when, as so often happens, we suppose it to be a source of objective truth or insight.

Nor did Hume deem his own causal account of the workings of the human mind immune to these considerations. The production of customs by the constant conjunction of perceptions; the power of an impression to enliven a customarily associated idea; the dependence of impressions of reflexion on ideas of sensation; the taking of an idea-copy from impression-originals; and the mind itself, as the recipient of perceptions and the agent of their relation: these causal relations are as imaginary as any others. The mind, this "system of different perceptions ... link'd together by the relation of cause and effect" (*T*261), is nothing "that really binds our several perceptions together," nor anything "really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together," but simply "the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them," the fanciful contrivance of "uniting principles in the ideal world" (*T*259f.). "The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one" (*T*259).

If we query who – or what – observes perceptions and makes these "ideal" connections, Hume's answer, it seems, is no answer: our powers of reason simply do not equip us to explain or understand further. We may fancy that we penetrate its "infinite obscurities" (*T*232) when we "run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*" (*T*254); yet, this is mere delusion:

> We have no perfect idea of any thing but of a perception. A substance is entirely different from a perception. We have, therefore, no idea of a substance. Inhesion in something is suppos'd to be requisite to support the existence of our perceptions.

Nothing appears requisite to support the existence of a perception. We have, therefore, no idea of inhesion. (*T*234)

For Hume, perceptions are prior to, and independent of, mind:

what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endow'd with a perfect simplicity and identity. Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be consider'd as separately existent; it evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; that is, in breaking off all its relations, with that connected mass of perceptions which constitute a thinking being. (*T*207)

Causal explanation (implicating dependence, necessary connection) is no longer possible when one withdraws to the point *before* association forms our successive perceptions into "that connected mass of perceptions which constitute a thinking being." Yet, for Hume, to concede that causal inference is no longer possible is tantamount to saying there can be no explanation at all. If we try to advance further, our words outrun our ideas; we grope, invent principles with unfathomable meanings, and to no purpose but to blind ourselves with our own smoke and mirrors. As with the ultimate operating principles governing external objects (see *T*267f.), so, too, "any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical" (*T*xvii): we must resist the urge to speculation, and accept that the ultimate sources and operating principles of that succession of perceptions which constitutes the "raw material" of associative imagination are veiled in impenetrable obscurity.

Nor is this yet the whole story. Hume explained necessary connections entirely in terms of imagination and its feelings: a reflexive impression comprised of feelings of facility (in the transition from one perception to its successor) and vivacity (if the transition is from an impression to an idea). This makes it possible to understand causal relations – or, rather, the customs of which they consist – in two quite distinct ways: from a *causal* point of view, as the *effect* of observed constant conjunction; or from an *introspective* viewpoint, as a transition of thought imbued with the aforementioned feelings. The second (which is an analysis of content, not a causal explanation) is independent of the first. In other words, the causal explanation, like any such, might well be falsified, and yet there be no loss of essential content to the idea of cause itself (and this could be so even if one lacked any memory of constant conjunction – as someone who had never been exposed to light might be given a sensation of red by using a probe to stimulate the appropriate nerve cells). Hume's independent introspective account thus opened the way to a safe skeptical haven to

shelter him from the criticism that his own theory of association entails an observing, active, perduring mind. For, if pressed, he could reply: according to my analysis of the idea of cause and effect, its sole contents are (i) the immediately perceptible relation of temporal succession plus the feelings of (ii) vivacity and (iii) ease of transition. How causal relations arise I have explained so far as experience (= causal explanation) permits. Appeal to principles of real connection lying beyond experience I *will* not engage in for I *can*not, as there is no possible source or warrant for ideas other than experience; I must therefore plead the privilege of the skeptic and avow my ignorance.

Skeptic or naturalist?

For more than a century, the falseness of reason as portrayed by Hume – the ideal, illusory nature of its principles and productions – was accepted at face value.[2] This changed, however, thanks especially to a series of articles by Norman Kemp Smith, culminating in his 1941 book, *The Philosophy of David Hume*.[3] To Kemp Smith, the traditional portrait of Hume as the exponent of a radical, destructive skepticism was not simply a caricature, but a distortion, even an inversion, of his true position. Kemp Smith's Hume is more interested in answers than in questions, more concerned with action than knowledge, content to believe even where he is ignorant, and far keener to avoid than to seek out skeptical culs-de-sac:

> Which is the more fundamental in his thinking, the naturalism or the scepticism? ... Nature, through the beliefs to which it gives rise ... acts as an arbiter. It defines the conditions of health, and the regimen suitable for its maintenance. Scepticism serves as an ally, but in due subordination, not an equal ... Man, he insists, while a creature of Nature, is yet a being in whom reflexion plays so large a part, and operates so extensively in the formation of *artificial* beliefs, that nothing short of the dispassionate questionings of a sceptical philosophy can avail to keep him in wholesome conformity with Nature's ends ... He had no intention of proving – quite the contrary – that there is no such thing as rational necessity. For consciousness of it, as he recognised, is implied in the proof that in particular instances it is absent ... Hume's manner ... shows very clearly that he does not mean to deny the objective reality of material bodies or their mutual influence.[4]

Some recent interpreters have gone even farther than Kemp Smith, claiming that Hume did not merely take for granted, but expressly set out to affirm, the mind-independent reality of causation and physical objects.[5] Yet, such a view does not do justice to the insight at the heart of Kemp Smith's break with the past: it was not that Hume took anti-skeptical positions on the same, traditional metaphysical issues earlier interpreters

had supposed him to have treated skeptically, but that such issues were not his true concern. Hume employed skepticism as a weapon to break others of their metaphysical commitments, not for the purpose of replacing these with new ones, but in order to shift the focus of philosophy away from metaphysics to all and only those questions that can be dealt with entirely naturalistically. On the Kemp Smith view, therefore, Hume's originality and greatness lay in the emphasis he placed on rationally inexplicable, unwarrantable beliefs, rooted in human nature, which serve to regulate the conduct of our lives; and this emphasis on naturalism over skepticism remains, in one form or another, the majority view in Hume interpretation today.[6]

To exponents of this view, the notion of a "false reason" is a non-sequitur. For while our reason may lack the divine guarantees demanded by Descartes, since we have no other with which to compare or contrast it, how – except by relying on the veracity of this same reason – could we demonstrate or discover its falsehood? All we can legitimately ask is whether it is possible that one could ever come to *believe* it to be false – for example, actually convince oneself of the non-existence of bodies, real relations of cause and effect, etc. – and so actually become a skeptic in life. To this, of course, the answer is all too obviously and uninterestingly no; with the exception of those brief moments when we are caught in the throes of philosophical speculation (see *T*217), no one is capable of disbelieving these things ("Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable," *T*183). So, interpreters of a naturalist bent would caution us against taking talk of "false reason" literally: we are misreading the message at the heart of Hume's philosophy if we suppose him ready to countenance the notion that the only kind of reason we know is, or could be, "false" – so far as this word may have any meaning at all.

The present work is a challenge to the naturalistic consensus in Humean scholarship. The position defended in it is that Hume's naturalism, far from being incompatible with radical skepticism, actually dovetails into it, so that the proposition that human reason is false possesses the same irresistible authority of natural belief as does its contrary. The key to recognizing this is that not all the natural beliefs identified by Hume are beliefs of reason (= imagination). For what seems to have escaped interpreters in the tradition of Kemp Smith is that beliefs founded on the immediate data of sense have precisely the same nature and authority as the beliefs he ascribed to idea-enlivening imagination; each alike owes its dominion over us not to what they *reveal* or enable us to *discover*, but

simply and solely to the *feeling* of vivacity they engender in the contemplating mind:

> the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and ... this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. (*T*86)

Since Hume made clear that the testimony of immediate consciousness gainsays all the ideas and beliefs of imagination (for example, *T*188ff.), we are all possessors of two sets of diametrically opposed, yet equally natural and irresistible, beliefs, between which we are powerless to choose. Put another way, each of us is as certain (on the basis of the senses) of the falsity of natural beliefs founded on imagination as we are powerless to disbelieve them (as is true too of conflicts of natural beliefs internal to imagination – see, for example, *T*266). And to maintain that all beliefs founded on custom and other propensities of imagination are mere natural *illusions* is nothing other than to believe that human reason is a false reason.

What saves us then from total skepticism? Only the aforementioned "singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them with so sensible an impression, as we do those, which are more easy and natural." The possession of contradictory beliefs poses problems for us only if they are brought into actual opposition, within a single purview. Yet, no attitudes or modes of awareness are less suitable to be brought together in this way than those of immediate consciousness and imagination: the one persuades us that reality consists of disparate, instantaneous perceptions in perpetual flux, while the other discloses an orderly world of dynamically interconnected, enduring objects (the two systems of *T*108). Although it is immediately evident that perceptions and objects are identically the same existents, we are preserved from the paradoxes this entails by the mere fact that great difficulty and exertion are required to unite the two views in one. Were our natures different, if our imaginations found it easy to adopt this perspective, we would surely succumb to a skeptical despair from which we could never extricate ourselves. But this nightmare human nature spares us by depriving such conflicts of any ability to make a strong, enduring impact on us. This, above all, the philosopher must recognize. For then, when the "manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason" are brought to light, he will not be led to question his methods and results by the fact that something seemingly so grave and dire as the falsity of reason affects him far less than the sickness of a loved one or a humiliation. Such a ranking of priorities may not seem reasonable, but neither is it contrary to reason

(after all, "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger," *T*416). It simply is so. Trivial suggestions of the fancy, and they alone, save human reason from the precipice; and, recognizing this, the philosopher will not be tempted to turn his back on reason in favor of a quasi-fideistic naturalism. This, in my view, is the position of Hume: a "mitigated skepticism" not on account of its content, but on our unruffled reaction to it ("A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them," *T*273).

With the thesis stated, let us proceed to the means employed to develop and defend it. My purpose is to show that Hume's naturalism leads to a most extreme skepticism. As purely a matter of textual interpretation, the means throughout must be exegetical: painstaking, detailed analysis of the main components of Hume's naturalistic account of human understanding (association, belief, causal inference, identity, etc.). Implicit in such an approach is the need to identify and respect the basic lines of the theory as laid down by Hume himself. For, if an interpretation is to have any claim to being a precise rendering of the positions and unifying standpoint actually present in a text, fixed points to moor, guide, and establish its parameters are indispensable. In their absence, attempts to resolve ambiguities, eliminate obscurities, extract arguments, etc., are bound to seem makeshift and idiosyncratic. Yet, therein lies the difficulty facing us: there is little agreement where the fixed points in Hume's philosophy lie.[7] Apparent inconsistent formulations of principle, or principles belied by practice, abound in his writing, obliging one sometimes to sacrifice the letter of his philosophy to one's sense of its spirit. And here the choices one makes are determined, above all, by whether one believes its spirit to be fundamentally skeptical or naturalist.

There is no better example of how an interpreter's confidence that he has penetrated into the true spirit of Hume's philosophy can shape the way he traces its basic lines – even in conscious opposition to the text and without corroborating evidence – than the case of Kemp Smith. If for no other reason than the deep and lasting mark his views have stamped on subsequent Hume interpretation, they merit detailed consideration:

(1) *The vivacity of impressions*. Hume was quite explicit that the single feature constitutive of the distinction between ideas and impressions is their differing degree of vivacity. Further, as a difference solely of degree, it follows that, when Hume explains the vivacity of an *idea* as belief in the real existence of its content, we must understand the vivacity of impressions *in precisely the same way*: as belief in the real existence of the content present in them. Kemp Smith, however, rejects this implication. While

conceding that Hume employed the term "vivacity" to characterize both impressions and ideas, he claims that this usage must be "reinterpreted, and understood in a non-literal, indeed metaphorical, sense";[8] hence, "vivacity" as applied to impressions has a different meaning than when applied to ideas, and, in particular, does *not* connote naturalistic belief. Accordingly, the distinction between impressions and ideas is based not on difference in vivacity – "the seemingly explicit character of many of his statements notwithstanding"[9] – but on the relation of original to copy. Kemp Smith gave numerous arguments in defense of his position; yet, quite clearly, his bold decision to draw the fundamental lines of Hume's philosophy elsewhere than Hume himself saw fit to do was ultimately a matter of "gut feeling" – his sense that Hume's naturalism was the primary determinant in his philosophy. For, if a uniform sense of "vivacity" were admitted, how could the naturalism possibly be detached from the theory of ideas, and thence from subjectivist skepticism?

Besides limiting the equation of vivacity with belief to ideas, Kemp Smith also restricted the equation of belief with vivacity to beliefs founded on iterated experience. It seems never to have occurred to him that Hume may have held that beliefs founded on immediate consciousness owe their infallibility precisely to their partaking of that very feeling of vivacity. Instead of taking Hume at his word, that *all* belief is merely vivacity, he took for granted that the infallibility of immediate consciousness was the same for Hume as for Descartes, Locke, or Berkeley: a matter purely of insight, or intuition. This completely ignores the fact that infallible knowledge implies not simply the *absence* of doubt but the *presence* of belief – a belief so powerful as to *exclude* doubt – and Hume offered only one theory of belief: vivacity.[10] Because of this oversight, Kemp Smith excluded immediate consciousness from the scope of naturalistic belief, and so, like every interpreter since, overlooked precisely that which, above all, distinguishes Hume's theory of ideas from that of his predecessors. We thus arrive at the view that the skepticism to which the naturalism would otherwise lead is subservient to it:

> Not only ... is Hume unshaken in his adhesion to Locke's doctrine of ideas by the sceptical consequences to which it leads, this is one main reason why he values the doctrine so highly ... His purpose, from the start, has been to give prominence to those negative consequences, and to push them as far as they can be made to go. The more negative their character, the more evident must it become that "ideas" cannot afford a sufficient basis for belief, and that belief must therefore be accounted for in some other, very different, manner ... He perceived very clearly that the theory of ideas, in being retained, would in his system have to subserve uses very different from any to which it had hitherto been put, and that it was not therefore merely in his supplement to the theory of ideas but also even in respect of

his treatment of the theory itself that he must rest his philosophy on a foundation almost entirely new.[11]

By contrast, the view I advance here – that the theory of ideas was for Hume neither subordinate nor superior to naturalism but one and the same with it – is grounded on a thesis derivable directly from the text: *all vivacity is belief (including that of impressions), and all belief vivacity (including that founded on immediate consciousness)*. Hume did not have two theories of belief, one for ideas made vivid in consequence of iterated experience, another for immediate consciousness independent of any reference to vivacity; rather, all belief without exception *is* a feeling of vivacity. If anything can be identified as the single founding insight of Hume's theory of understanding, informing and uniting all its elements, it is this.

However, to understand my claim correctly, it is essential to recognize that Hume's sense of "belief" should not be equated with "believe to be true," i.e. affirmation. This is in effect to treat belief as inherently propositional which, in my view, is incompatible with Hume's psychological conception of belief/vivacity applicable to infants and animals. We should consider "believe to be true" to be, from Hume's perspective, secondary and derivative by comparison with its primary sense of "believe to be real," i.e. belief in the real existence of a content present in sensation, reflexion, or thought. For the beliefs most fundamental to and characteristic of understanding, and so of most concern to the philosopher – a cause of every beginning of existence, an external world, the self – are precisely those that, in Hume's view, humans share with animals. "Belief" in this sense contrasts not with denial (affirmation of the falsity of), but with fantasy (the fictitious, the unreal). For example, while the same content, say, an object of fear like a charging tiger, may present itself immediately to consciousness either in sensation or in fancy (as an idea-copy), it is only in the former case that evasive action is taken. The reason, as I understand Hume, is that human nature ordains that only the sensation shall create in us a maximal feeling of vivacity, and so engender belief in the real existence of that present in it. Degree of belief/vivacity constitutes the sole difference between the effects of sensation and mere thought. And since there is here no implication of the propositional, we can easily see why Hume saw fit to extend it to infants and animals (as he did the principles of association, whose importance to human understanding derives solely from their ability to enliven otherwise unbelieved ideas).

(2) *Relations*. In Humean nomenclature, *perceptions* are the immediate objects of consciousness. Such objects are of two kinds: impressions and ideas. Notably absent from their ranks are *relations*. Hume ascribed relations to the imagination; hence, instead of being objects *before*