

Hume's Causal Epistemology: How Pre-Established Harmony, Custom and General
Rules Confer Justification

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandfather, Tom, and Aunt Anne, both of whom I owe a great debt for their immeasurable influence on my life and both of whom passed away during the completion of this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures	vi
Abstract	vii
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Humean Epistemological Possibilities.....	5
III. Hume’s Negative Arguments and a Positive Explanatory Response	20
IV. Unanswered Normative Question in the <i>Treatise</i>	42
V. An Externalist Alternative	59
VI. A Formal Articulation of Humean Internalist - Externalist Epistemology.....	74
VII. Concluding Remarks.....	85
Works Cited	89

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1: Goldman's Pattern 2 Case of Knowledge	72

ABSTRACT

HUME'S CAUSAL EPISTEMOLOGY: HOW PRE-ESTABLISHED HARMONY, CUSTOM AND GENERAL RULES CONFER JUSTIFICATION

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Hume has often been read as a sort of global skeptic. In this thesis, I argue that he should be understood instead as a causal epistemologist with the hope that this reading can provide new insights into Hume's project as well as shed light on some of the difficult questions of contemporary naturalistic epistemology. The common practice of approaching Hume's negative arguments in *T* 1.3.6 and *T* 1.4.1 in search of an account of the normativity of belief has led many to read him as a thoroughgoing skeptic, but coming to them with an understanding of the explanatory nature of Hume's project opens the possibility of reading these arguments as descriptive accounts of belief formation and reason and preserves possibilities for finding accounts of the warrant of reason and the justification of beliefs elsewhere in his works. Approaching these arguments in this light, I turn to an excerpt from Section V of the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding that has received little attention in which Hume argues that the source of the truth of our

beliefs is the “pre-established harmony between the course of nature [which is not directly known to us] and the succession of our ideas,” which is actuated by custom or habit. This discussion of the harmony between causation in the objects and causation in human minds serves as Hume’s account of warrant and marks him as a prototypical causal epistemologist of the likes of Alvin Goldman. When this account of warrant is paired with Hume’s account of the rationality achieved by the application of general rules, he can be read as offering a full-fledged externalist causal epistemology with an internalist epistemic norms that guide rational belief formation. These two levels of normativity jointly confer justification on our correctly formed beliefs.

I. Introduction

Beginning in his own time and spanning the two centuries since, there is a long tradition of reading David Hume as “a purely negative philosopher.”¹ His work is often cited as the *reductio ad absurdum* of British empiricism, showing that from the assumptions of Locke and Berkeley only radical skepticism ensues. Some readers have even claimed that “accepting [Hume’s] system and all it relevantly entails would commit one to skepticism given our contemporary construal of knowledge” as fallible yet justified true belief.² Many passages in the Humean corpus taken in isolation can undoubtedly lead to such conclusions, and even careful readings can be led astray by Hume’s notorious difficulty and the biases of history. Hume, however, was no such radical skeptic, and this traditional reading of his work has concealed interesting and possibly fruitful facets of his epistemology, which, if properly explored, show him to be an even more important figure in the history of philosophical thought than he is already taken to be.

It is time, I think, to approach Humean epistemology anew and without this historical baggage. Stripping away various approaches that elicit skeptical conclusions, Hume’s explanatory project can be better understood as a rejection of his predecessors’

¹ Stroud, *Hume*, 1.

² Meeker, “Hume: Radical Skeptic or Naturalized Epistemologist?,” 47.

accounts of reason as untenable not because they fail to account for the justification of beliefs but because they cannot even explain how we come to have beliefs at all. From this starting point, which is argued for most strongly in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1,³ Hume's positive argument can be seen as his attempt to construct an account of reason that explains how beliefs are formed and how they persist in the face of skeptical arguments, a task he thinks philosophers have not yet accomplished. Hume, read in this light, is not at all concerned with the epistemic status of beliefs in the sections that are often cited in support of his skepticism but merely with their origins. The door is left wide open for an account of the justification of beliefs to be discovered elsewhere in his writings.

Just such an account is found in Section V of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Here, Hume offers his take on why it is that we should accept properly formed probable beliefs as both true and advantageous to human endeavors. The reason, he claims, is that nature has made it so that the natural causal association of ideas in the imagination goes on in the same course as causation in the objects themselves. This "pre-established harmony" between the world and the human mind is the sole source of the warrant of reason. Coupled with Hume's advocacy of rational thought, this account of pre-established harmony comes to an epistemology that closely resembles, in many respects, causal epistemologies that did not gain popularity until the late 20th century, like that of Alvin Goldman. Hume, far from being a radical skeptic, was a prototypical causal

³ In referring to the *Treatise on Human Nature* I follow the *Hume Studies* standard by citing the Book, Part, and, sometimes, Section and Paragraph preceded by a *T*. The Sections just cited, for instance, are Book 1, Part 3, Section 6 and Book 1, Part 4, Section 1. If a specific paragraph is referenced it is the fourth number in the sequence. The Selby-Bigge Nidditch (SBN) edition page number are also provided in footnote citations.

epistemologist who prefigured advances in this field that would not occur for another 200 years after he wrote his *magnum opus*.

My argument for this thesis is constructed in Sections II through VI of this paper. Section II lays the groundwork for the causal epistemology account by arguing that the radical skepticism reading goes awry as the result of a bias toward normativity rather than explanation in reading Hume's negative arguments. Section III turns to these negative arguments found in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1, and argues that their purpose is not to support skepticism but, instead, to attack Locke's account of reason and strengthen Hume's own account, which is chiefly concerned with the explanation of the origin of beliefs out of the causal association of ideas by the imagination and their persistence in the face of skeptical arguments. Section IV serves to draw out the normative questions that are left mostly unanswered in *T* 1.3 and 1.4 and explores both the question of rationality and that of warrant, which is not thoroughly addressed until Section V of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (hereafter *EHU*).⁴

My own account of Hume's responses to the questions of rationality and warrant and a formulation of his full epistemological position are constructed in Sections V and VI. In these sections, I urge that we ought to see Hume as offering a bi-leveled account in which the first level – that of rationality – offers epistemic norms that ought to be followed in order to ensure that beliefs are formed in the most reasonable fashion. Ensuring the reasonableness of beliefs ensures, in turn, their justification, which is

⁴ By 'rationality' I mean to refer to the proper formation of beliefs with respect to reason, i.e., a rational belief is a belief that is formed via careful application of reason and not by some other means such as superstition or education. 'Warrant' refers to a status of the "faculty" of reason itself, i.e., its propensity to provide true beliefs that are advantageous to human endeavors.

derivative of the warrant inherent to belief formation by custom. The second level – that of warrant – has it that beliefs are warranted because custom, i.e., the causal association of ideas by the imagination, is a propensity that associates ideas in our minds in a way that mirrors causation, and thus regularity, in the world. I appeal to the contemporary, externalist causal epistemology account of Alvin Goldman and to Hume’s discussion of the “pre-established harmony” between custom and causation in the objects to argue that the justification of our beliefs is dependent on the serendipitous relationship between custom and the causal regularity of the objects in the world, and that though we cannot know independently of this pre-established harmony that causation in the objects exists, hence that this relationship holds, it is simply enough that it does. We may not, on Hume’s account, ever know that we know, but this does not preclude us from having justified beliefs so long as nature is in fact uniform and reason acts as its mirror.

II. Humean Epistemological Possibilities

The causal epistemology approach to Humean epistemology that is foundational to my argument (hereafter the CE view) takes Hume to be concerned primarily with offering an explanatory account of beliefs and their formation and secondarily with the normative aspect of the justification of at least some of those beliefs. This approach, however, is not the only possibility for reading Hume's epistemology and is in fact contrary to the most traditional readings. Hume has historically been understood as a skeptic, with much debate over whether this skepticism is of the sort that it applies generally to all knowledge claims or whether it is limited in scope to certain types of knowledge, e.g., the results of inductive inference or miracles.⁵ More recent interpretations – especially those that follow Norman Kemp Smith in reading Hume as a naturalist – have tended to downplay the role of skepticism in his epistemology, focusing their attention, instead, on the often explanatory nature of the positive accounts Hume offers.⁶ Regarding normative epistemological questions, these accounts of Hume run the spectrum of possible views from arguing that Hume offers no account of normativity – or at least no coherent account – to discovering full blown accounts of warrant and justification in his work. The CE view is of the latter type.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶ See, for example, Baier (1991), Owen (1999), Strawson (1989), and Stroud (1977).

In this section I propose three points of distinction by which accounts of Humean epistemology can be loosely classified in a way that highlights the essential differences between the CE view and the skeptical view that most strongly opposes it. First, I distinguish various accounts by whether they locate Humean skepticism on an ontological or an epistemological level. Second, because Hume has inherited and accepts without much criticism a very specific understanding of knowledge, I propose a distinction between accounts that read Hume's skepticism as applying only to knowledge thus understood or to the broader category of probable belief, i.e., whether he is skeptical only regarding beliefs about the 'relations of ideas' – of which we might possibly be certain – or about those 'matters of fact' that do not admit of certainty because of their empirical nature, as well. Third, and finally, I distinguish between those accounts that take Hume to be engaged in an explanatory project in *T* 1.3 and 1.4 and those that read these seemingly skeptical arguments in a predominantly normative light. This final distinction, I argue, weighs heavily on the other two. Reading these sections with a normative bent leads one towards understanding Hume as skeptical about probable belief, which, on the Humean account, entails epistemological skepticism. I refer to the combination of views resultant of the normative approach as *global skepticism*.

The goal of this introductory exercise is twofold. I want first to offer a brief overview of the positions of various authors regarding Hume's epistemology. Second, by the end of this section, I hope the reader will have a general idea of the naturalistic explanatory approach to Hume that necessarily underlies my normative epistemological discussion later in the paper and its opposition to the global skeptic reading that results

from approaching *T* 1.3 and 1.4 in a normative light. A more thorough account of my approach to reading Hume is developed in the next section.

The first distinction in this classification is that of ontological versus epistemological skepticism. Since I use these terms in a non-standard fashion, a brief note on what I intend by them is in order. Ontological skepticism is an incredulity toward claims of direct knowledge about the essential nature of the objects in the world. The ontological skeptic holds that we cannot directly access the objects themselves; we can only have contact with our own perceptions. This condition entails that we cannot know directly and independently the essential nature of the objects but leaves open the possibility of the justification of beliefs about the objects as mediated by our perceptions. Epistemological skepticism is the stronger claim that we cannot have any sufficient reasons to hold any beliefs about the objects whatsoever because there is no knowable justificatory link between the objects and our beliefs. The epistemological skeptic holds that even indirect knowledge claims that are mediated through the senses or arrived at by reasoning could not possibly be justified because we lack justificatory reasons for thinking that our perceptions correctly track the objects in the world.

A quote from Galen Strawson offers some useful insight into this distinction:

Hume holds that we can suppose and indeed firmly believe something to exist, and have what he calls a 'relative' idea of it, on account of some relation which we take it to stand in to us, and hence refer to it, *although we know nothing of its nature and have no sort of positive conception of it.*⁷

The claim here is that we are capable of forming something like a justified belief about the objects even though we cannot access them directly. The belief would be justified by

⁷ *Secret Connexion*, 12. Italics added.

virtue of the “relation which *we take* [the objects] to stand in to us” even though we know nothing of the true nature of the objects about which the belief was formed. This is precisely the position I label as ontological skepticism, because, though objects remain wholly unapproachable in one sense, it may be possible that we still justifiedly believe things about them as the result of some relation we take to hold between the objects and our minds. An epistemologically skeptical reading, to the contrary, would claim that Hume espouses a sort of skepticism that is all encompassing. It is not just direct access to the nature of the objects themselves that we are lacking; it is instead that we cannot have good reasons to hold any beliefs about the objects at all with any degree of certainty whatsoever because the link between the objects and our beliefs is lacking or, at least, unknowable by us.

It’s difficult – if not impossible – to read Hume as espousing anything less than ontological skepticism. His theory of ideas, which I will turn to in more detail further down, seems to come with this skeptical view already built into it. Because we have access to the perceptions that are before our minds and nothing beyond, it is impossible that we have the sort of access to the objects themselves that would be necessary for us to form direct and independent beliefs about them or their nature. Hume states this position unambiguously at *T* 1.3.5.2:

As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and ‘twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc’d by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv’d from the author of our being.⁸

⁸ *T*, 1.3.5.2; SBN 84.

The CE view takes Hume to be a skeptic on the ontological level. In this I follow in the footsteps of Owen, Strawson, and others, but, it is clearly not the only possibility. Some readers, such as Stroud, remain fairly ambiguous about whether or not Hume espouses merely ontological skepticism or something stronger. Still others, such as Meeker, are in complete contrast to the CE view in advancing an epistemological skepticism as the proper construal of Hume's thought. Meeker claims that Hume's arguments place humans in the position of having no justification for any beliefs at all due jointly to the lack of a knowable connection between objects and perceptions and to a lack of direct access to the objects.

The second distinction to be made regarding accounts of Hume's epistemology addresses the scope of his skepticism from a different perspective than the previous discussion. Hume inherited and accepted a fairly narrow construal of knowledge that equates this epistemic category with certainty. Accompanying his account of knowledge, Hume developed an account of what he variously calls opinion, probable belief, or beliefs regarding "matters of fact." One can rightly ask whether his skepticism encompasses only the category of knowledge-as-certainty or whether he was skeptical about the possibility of justification for probable beliefs, as well.

In the section of the *Treatise* titled "Of knowledge," Hume explains that only a small subset of our beliefs may "be the objects of knowledge and certainty" and that this certainty arises via the comparison of ideas with respect to "*resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number.*"⁹ The employment of these

⁹ Ibid., 1.3.1.2; SBN 70.

relationships in thought constitutes demonstrative reasoning, which functions by one's intuitively apprehending the relationships that hold between two ideas under comparison. As for Descartes and Locke before him, intuition for Hume is the immediate apprehension or perception of an *a priori* relationship that holds between ideas.¹⁰ Other beliefs may be formed through the employment of the philosophical relations of identity, time and place, and causation, but these do not admit of certainty, as they result from the presumption of a relation between ideas that is not necessary or inherent to them, i.e., some sort of external relationship not entailed by the very ideas themselves.¹¹ These beliefs are not the products of intuition but of experience or probable reason. If Hume was a skeptic, did his skepticism apply only to the products of intuition and demonstrative reasoning, or was he skeptical about probable beliefs and opinions, as well?

Hume's argument for skepticism about demonstrative reasoning is well known. The claim that we lack the certainty of knowledge, rests on the arguments presented in the section titled "Of skepticism with regard to reason." Hume points out that though the rules of "demonstrative sciences"¹² are "certain and infallible," we must realize that our application of these rules via our "fallible and uncertain faculties" is very likely to lead us into error.¹³ The rules of demonstrative reasoning themselves are capable of maintaining certainty, but our application of the objectively certain rules leads to a subjective

¹⁰ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 35ff.

¹¹ *T*, 1.3.1.1; SBN 69.

¹² Hume limits the demonstrative sciences to only mathematics and algebra. See Owen (1999), pp. 94-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.1.1; SBN 180.

probability of less than one that the beliefs we come to are true.¹⁴ Hume confirms this position just a few lines later when he states that “all knowledge degenerates into probability.”¹⁵ All claims regarding the certain sciences of mathematics and algebra fall to the uncertainty of the human application of their rules.¹⁶ Certainty and, therefore, knowledge as Hume understands it are impossible goals for human thought, and, in this sense, we can label Hume a skeptic about knowledge-as-certainty.¹⁷ Is it possible, though, to also consider him a skeptic regarding the deliverances of probable reasoning? *T* 1.4.1 intersects with this question, as well, but the way in which the text is read greatly influences the answer gleaned from it.

According to Hume’s account, if one is to reason sensibly about a given subject, she must realize that her first judgment “deriv’d from the nature of the object” is prone to error, and she must make a second-order judgment “deriv’d from the understanding” in an effort to account for this error.¹⁸ Furthermore, because her second-order judgment is

¹⁴ Meeker, “Hume on Knowledge, Certainty, and Probability: Anticipating the Disintegration of the Analytic/Synthetic Divide?,” 232.

¹⁵ *T*, 1.4.1.1; SBN 180.

¹⁶ An interesting objection is often made on this point. Hume argues that large mathematical calculations are prone to error, and for that reason we should check those calculations and reduce our estimation of them from a certainty to a probability. But, some protest, many mathematical statements are immediately intuitive and involve no calculation, so Hume is wrong in saying that we cannot be certain of them, e.g., $1+1=2$. Hume, however, does consider this possibility at *T* 181. He argues here that any large calculation could be re-written as a series of these smaller, intuitive mathematical statements, and we should, therefore, be capable of maintaining certainty in larger calculations. This, however, is quite obviously not the case; we do often get calculations wrong. Meeker calls Hume’s argument that the uncertainty of large calculations shows the uncertainty of small, intuitive ones his “trickle down theory of fallibility” (2007, p. 234). Perhaps a better way of grasping this is that Hume’s concern is with the fallibility of our mental faculties and not of mathematics. The fact that we often err in large calculations shows our fallibility, which applies in all cases. We should thus consider all past cases of our application of mental faculties when considering whether or not we have erred in any case. We may, after all, have been hit on the head a few minutes ago and now think that $1+1=3$.

¹⁷ Meeker, “Hume on Knowledge, Certainty, and Probability: Anticipating the Disintegration of the Analytic/Synthetic Divide?,” 227-31.

¹⁸ *T*, 1.4.1.5; SBN 181.

also fallible, she must make a third-order judgment, and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on *ad infinitum*. Upon this reasoning, Hume claims, judgments become weaker on each successive application of probability, and “no finite object can subsist under a decrease repeated *in infinitum*.” Thus, every belief must devolve into severe uncertainty, and we are seemingly left with a thoroughgoing skepticism that applies not only to demonstrative reasoning as developed above, but to probable reasoning, too.¹⁹

According to the global skeptic, Hume presents two epistemic norms in this argument: 1) “we ought always to correct our first judgment” and 2) “we are oblig’d by reason to estimate the probability of error.” The application of these two norms to all of our reasoning leads to global skepticism and admits of no escape from skeptical results for either certainty or probability, i.e., by the global skeptic’s lights, both knowledge and opinion fall to the *reductio* argument of *T* 1.4.1.²⁰

Global skepticism argues that Hume has here constructed an insurmountable argument for skepticism, but in the very next paragraph Hume claims that neither he “nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion.”²¹ Though skepticism with regard to the judgments of probable reasoning seems to be an inevitable consequence of the proper employment of reason through the application of the norms just discussed, it is clear that in our daily lives we can’t help but hold beliefs. Hume evidently understands this, and he thinks that he has an explanation for why skeptical

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.1.6; SBN 182. It has been argued that this is not necessarily the case. The certainty of a belief will diminish asymptotically, but how low our estimation of it becomes is dependent on the probability assigned to each successive correction. I will, however, allow Hume his point, as it is immaterial to my argument.

²⁰ Meeker, “Is Hume’s Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?,” 135-6.

²¹ *T*, 1.4.1.7; SBN 183.

arguments never stick beyond the walls of one's study. If it works, Hume believes his argument is capable of explaining away this paradoxical conclusion wherein reason dictates an impossible skepticism, but to properly understand his argument it is necessary to turn to the third point of differentiation of Humean epistemological accounts. The distinction between those accounts that focus on normative aspects of Hume's negative or skeptical arguments and those that focus on the explanatory nature of his project weighs heavily on the proper explication of Hume's escape from the *reductio* argument. In making this turn, I show that properly approaching this argument allows us to understand the limit of Hume's skepticism, which leaves room for the possibility of justification for probable beliefs, i.e., a proper reading preserves the possibility of reading Hume as merely a skeptic about demonstrative knowledge and an ontological skeptic, but nothing stronger.

David Owen argues that Hume's central concern in *T* 1.3 and 1.4 is not, as many have taken it to be, justification or the warrant of probable reason, but is instead an explanation "of how we come by beliefs in the unobserved *at all*" and how these beliefs persist in the face of skeptical arguments.²² On Owen's reading, Hume's negative arguments in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1 aim to show that reason as commonly construed and left to its own devices is 1) incapable of providing us with the "causal maxim" or "uniformity principle" and 2) is self-destructive, as discussed above.²³ Hume's positive argument, summarized at *T* 1.3.7.6-8, appears to offer an explanation of how we come to causal

²² *Hume's Reason*, 137.

²³ The uniformity principle is simply the belief that the future will resemble the past, i.e., that the world operates in a causally uniform way. This concept is further developed in Section III.

beliefs, thus resolving (1).²⁴ Our causal beliefs are not the result of reason because probable reason can only function once the uniformity principle is in place. Hume shows, however, that we cannot discover any impression from which the uniformity principle may have arisen and reason cannot itself provide us with the necessary idea as “it is not endow’d with a power of production.”²⁵ Instead, causal beliefs arise only out of the association of ideas via the imagination, which Hume calls variously “custom” or “habit.” Belief is the result of this association when it is initiated by a present impression that bestows upon the conceived idea a certain degree of force and vivacity.²⁶ Reason, then, is merely something the imagination does.

Hume answers the question of reason’s self-destructive capacity posed in *T* 1.4.1 by appeal to the “singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy” by which the force of an argument is diminished with each additional step the argument must take.²⁷ Since the *reductio* argument of *T* 1.4.1 demands that a long chain of reasoning be undertaken to undermine the original belief, Hume argues it can hold little or no sway over the formation of our beliefs. The holding of a belief, for Hume, is no more than one’s having before her mind an idea enlivened to a sufficient degree by a recently present impression. Skepticism would thus entail that the vivacity of this belief be diminished upon the application of the epistemic norms prescribed in the *reductio* argument, but this does not happen because of the loss of force on each successive judgment. For example, the vivacity of those reflexive beliefs one forms immediately in response to visual

²⁴ *T*, 1.3.7.6; SBN 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.3.6.4-8; SBN 88-90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.3.7.6; SBN 97. Hume’s account of reason, which is foundational for my argument, is further developed in Section III.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.4.7.7; SBN 267.

impressions cannot be diminished to that of an idea because each successive judgment has less efficacy in diminishing vivacity than the one before it. Hume thinks that by this argument he has shown how natural propensities of the human mind prevent reason from undermining itself.

According to Owen, Hume has offered explanations that aim to explain the formation and persistence of beliefs after having shown that the faculty of reason as it was commonly understood is incapable of generating and maintaining most of the beliefs we hold. It would be quite curious for Hume to offer these sorts of explanatory positive accounts if his central concern was with justification or warrant, as he would seem to have seriously missed the mark he had set for himself, since his answers do not even obliquely address these concerns. Thus, Owen claims, by the “principle of charity” we should understand Hume’s central concern as the explanation of belief formation and maintenance and not the justification of beliefs or the warrant of reason.²⁸ In *T* 1.3 and 1.4 Hume is ultimately concerned with explaining the function of reason and not with justifying its employment.

Those who read Hume’s negative arguments as aimed at the justification of beliefs or the warrant of reason find little hope in his positive claims for resolving the problems attributed to reason, and, thus, they surmise that Hume’s account amounts to global skepticism.²⁹ These readers attribute to Hume the argument that “probable

²⁸ *Hume's Reason*, 134-7.

²⁹ See, for instance, Meeker (1998), p. 129. Meeker argues that because we determine whether we have an idea of necessary connection via reflection or introspection none of our beliefs can be justified on the Humean account.

reasoning is unreasonable.”³⁰ This claim seems rather bizarre in itself, as Hume’s endeavor at a naturalistic account of philosophical problems seems quite readily and quite frequently to appeal to probable reasoning. The entire edifice of Humean thought would be self refuting if the sort of probable reasoning he often employs were deemed by himself to be unreasonable. We are saved from this reading, however, if we follow Owen in interpreting the negative arguments as claiming “that probable reasoning is not based on reason [and] that the production of beliefs in the unobserved is not explained by the faculty of reason functioning in the way it is normally thought to be functioning.”³¹ One can then read the positive arguments as explaining how belief formation, beliefs in the unobserved, and, thus, probable reasoning, are based on the association of ideas via the imagination. In this way, Hume ties his account of reason to the basic principles he uses in explaining all functions of the mind. On this reading, the questions of warrant and justification are left unresolved. Hume is offering an account of how probable-reason-as-association-of-ideas functions, without reading into it any account of the warrant of these associations of ideas or the justification of the beliefs thus formed. Furthermore, looking back to the second distinction, one can still read Hume as a skeptic about knowledge-as-certainty without thinking that anything in his explanatory account entails skepticism about probable or causal beliefs.

I have been referring to both the *justification* of beliefs and the *warrant* of reason in my argument, and this is no accident. I intend there to be a distinction made between these two epistemic concepts, which are closely related to one another. Warrant, in the

³⁰ Ibid., 137.

³¹ Ibid., 137.

way I am using it, denotes a status of reason, i.e., the set of conditions that make reason the function of the imagination to which we should appeal either for pragmatically advantageous beliefs or because it is in some way conducive to the formation of true beliefs. Justification, on the other hand, is that which attaches to a true belief to make it knowledge on contemporary accounts, i.e., it is that which makes us believe our beliefs are true. Warrant is necessary but not sufficient for justification, since it may be possible to incorrectly form a belief via reasoning. It is only when a belief is *properly* formed by a warranted belief forming process that it may be called justified.

This purely explanatory account of Hume's reason is not entirely satisfactory. Hume claims at various junctures that reason is and ought to be considered as a better guide to thought and action than other possible sources of belief.³² One could suppose that he makes these claims about reason without claiming any justification for the beliefs delivered by this now pseudo-faculty. If one does so, however, then one has no grounds on which to accept the claim that reason is suited to guide our actions because that claim itself is the product of probable reasoning. Hume must, in order to offer a full and complete account of reason, address these normative concerns, and my argument that he does just this is the focus of Sections IV-VI of this paper.

The rubric I have constructed attempts to classify accounts of Humean epistemology with regards to the level of skeptical claims (ontological vs. epistemological), the scope of Hume's skepticism (knowledge-as-certainty vs. knowledge

³² See, for example, the claim that only reasonable beliefs are "recogniz'd by philosophers" at *T* 1.3.9.19 and the statement that "[the] wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence" at *EHU* 110, as well as the entire first section of *EHU*.

and beliefs formed via probable reason; i.e., opinion), and the focus of Hume's account (explanatory vs. normative). Various readings of Hume made by other authors can be placed within these criteria. For example, Barry Stroud's account in *Hume* focuses on the explanatory nature of Hume's naturalistic account.³³ Stroud reads Hume as absolutely skeptical about ontological claims but not necessarily epistemological claims, and remains rather ambivalent on the question of the possible justification of beliefs.³⁴ Meeker's reading, to the contrary, takes Hume to be centrally concerned with the normative dimensions of belief. This leads him to consider Hume to be skeptical about both demonstrative and probable belief and, thus, to be an epistemological skeptic, as well.

If reading Hume in a normative light strongly directs one toward understanding him as a global skeptic, reading him as offering an account skewed heavily toward an explanatory project preserves possibilities for an escape from global skepticism. As I've shown in this section, one can approach Hume's work as offering a naturalistic explanatory account of reason and take him to be a skeptic about demonstrative knowledge and direct knowledge of the essential nature of the objects without drifting into a thoroughgoing skepticism about all of human belief. It is upon this explanatory foundation that the CE view argued for in the remainder of this paper must be

³³ *Hume*, 11. Cf. 51, Hume's central concern is "why and how we make the particular inferences that we do from one event or state of affairs to another."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86. Stroud never states outright that Hume's account precludes the possibility of justified belief, but in a number of instances he does insinuate as much. For example, on p. 86 he states that our belief that "necessity is something that 'resides' in the relations between objects" is really a belief formed by the association of ideas on Hume's account, but that it is a false belief. The fact that he calls this belief false could lead us to a reading of Stroud that attributes to him what Strawson has called the "realist regularity theory" of Hume.

constructed. It is only by understanding the limited scope of Humean skepticism that the possibility for drawing out an account of justification and warrant in his work can be preserved.

III. Hume's Negative Arguments and a Positive Explanatory Response

In the previous section I developed a rubric for understanding various positions that have been taken up in the reading of Hume's epistemology. Of these positions I have claimed that global skepticism – the position that Hume's arguments succeed in showing humans to be lacking any sort of justified belief – finds support in the negative (or skeptical) arguments posed in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1 by reading them in a normative light, while the CE view approaches these sections understanding Hume to be engaged in an explanatory project regarding belief formation and achieves very different results. In this section my goal is to further develop the explanatory account, defend its plausibility, and demonstrate how it leaves open the possibility of developing the normative dimension of Humean epistemology by drawing from outside of *T* 1.3 and 1.4.

Hume owes a great debt to Locke for both his theory of ideas and his strict empiricism, but it is the Lockean conception of reason that is the target of Hume's attacks in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1. According to Locke's account there are two sorts of reasoning: demonstrative and probable. Demonstrative reasoning is the sole source of knowledge beyond the immediate intuitive perception of agreement or disagreement between two ideas, and functions by the employment of intuition in connecting ideas together in a chain of reasoning. Suppose that one wants to know whether two angles of a triangle are the same. By observing the triangle, one has before her mind the idea of each of the

angles and, so long as any difference is not very minute, can perceive by intuition if these ideas are in agreement. The result of intuition is the most certain kind of knowledge according to Locke, and, he claims, it, “like bright sunshine, forces itself immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for...doubt.”³⁵

Demonstrative reasoning is built on the foundation of intuition. Take, for example, the case of comparing the angles of a triangle and two right angles. The mind cannot immediately perceive the agreement between these two sets of ideas, so intuition alone cannot be the source of our knowledge of it. One can, however, gain this knowledge by constructing a chain of ideas to show the agreement of the sum of the right angles and the sum of the triangle’s angles. The agreement of each intermediate idea with those juxtaposed to it will be intuitive, and by this process certainty is preserved in our knowledge about the agreement of more disparate ideas.³⁶

The extent of demonstrative reasoning is very limited, but it is supplemented, according to Locke, by probable reasoning, which is the source of many beliefs that fall just short of knowledge. Probable reasoning does not produce knowledge because the chain of ideas that constitute an instance of it contains at least one connection between adjacent ideas that is not intuited. Instead, some of the connections between ideas are merely presumed to hold on the evidence of past experience or the testimony of others.³⁷ When this is the case, one can be led to form an opinion one way or the other on a given

³⁵ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 229.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 229-30; Cf. 321-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 304; Cf. 322.

question, but is incapable of attaining certain knowledge regarding it. Causal beliefs seem to be of this kind since the causal connection between two ideas relies only on our past experiences of them and on nothing inherent to either idea.³⁸

It is Lockean probable reasoning that Hume runs against with his negative arguments of *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1. The global skeptic takes the first of these arguments to show that demonstrative reasoning is merely a species of probable reasoning. Hume argues that since any demonstration could possibly contain an error, we should correct each demonstration according to past experience. Thus, any result of demonstrative reasoning should be corrected by probable reasoning and is ultimately an opinion rather than certain knowledge. But, the global skeptic proceeds, Hume also provides two arguments that are disastrous for probable reasoning. The first is an extension of *T* 1.4.1. If each judgment must be corrected for past errors, then the degree of certainty with which we hold opinions will itself be diminished until there is no reason left at all to hold any belief over another. The second argument is found in *T* 1.3.6 where Hume convincingly argues that the belief that the future will resemble the past, which is foundational to probable reasoning, is not derivable from either reason or experience – as Locke claimed it was – but is merely a product of the imagination. Reason itself, then, is nothing more than imagination! None of us is justified in holding any beliefs whatsoever, claims the global skeptic, since any belief formed by reason is just a product of the fancy and entirely lacks reasons in support of it.

³⁸ Locke references the experiential source of the idea of causation at p. 132, which Hume also refutes. See Owen (1999), Chapter 3, for a similar discussion of Locke's theory of reason.

We need not follow the global skeptic's lead. The CE view reads these same arguments as Hume's attempt to show the shortcomings of Lockean reason, but the fault that he highlights is not a lack of justification or warrant but that Locke's theory cannot even explain the basic functioning of reason. Lockean reason, according to Hume, can neither account for the source of the belief that the future resembles the past nor can it escape the skeptical argument of *T* 1.4.1, but Hume's own explanatory account of the functioning of reason can achieve both of these ends. Hume's primary concern is just this explanation of how it is we are able to reason at all, and only once he has achieved this explanation does he begin to concern himself with the normative aspects of belief. The rest of this section is devoted to further understanding Hume's negative arguments and developing his explanatory response to them. In the end, I show that in reading Hume in this fashion an opening remains that allows for a broader search – specifically in the *EHU* – for his account of the justification of beliefs.

The problem of induction has often been claimed to have its roots in Hume's argument at *T* 1.3.6, which shows that probable reasoning proceeds on a seemingly unjustified or unreasonable premise. In the section in which this argument appears, Hume has already begun his search for the origin of the idea of causation by which probable reasoning functions. He has ruled out the possibility that the idea of causation might arise from the qualities of the objects themselves because “which-ever of these qualities I pitch on, I find some object, that is not possest of it, and yet falls under the denomination of cause or effect.”³⁹ Turning to the relations between ideas, he discovers that objects that

³⁹ Hume, *T*, 1.3.2.5; SBN 75.

we take to be causally related always stand in relationships of contiguity and succession to one another, but this again leads nowhere. Observing a single instance of the interaction of objects, we see nothing more than one object approaching another ever more closely, and then the second object moving or reacting in some way. We cannot discover anything like the necessity that we presume to be existent in causation upon the examination of a single impression.⁴⁰ At this point, Hume realizes the centrality of necessity in our idea of causation, and, upon this realization, he turns his attention to the source of the “NECESSARY CONNEXION” that we take to exist between a cause and its effect.⁴¹

After pursuing a few dead ends in his search, Hume comes to the section titled “Of the inference from the impression to the idea” in which the so-called problem of induction comes into the light. Still searching for the source of our idea of necessary connection, Hume comes upon the fact that we only find ourselves with this idea after having observed multiple instances of causally connected impressions and, thus, surmises that a key component of the necessary connection must be a constant conjunction between two objects.⁴² But how does one proceed from past experience and the observation of a constant conjunction to the idea that a present impression necessarily brings about its causal antecedent? Hume wants to know whether it is “the understanding or imagination” that facilitates this inference.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.3.2.6-9; SBN 76.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1.3.2.11; SBN 77.

⁴² Ibid., 1.3.6.3; SBN 87.

⁴³ Ibid., 1.3.6.4; SBN 88.

The first possibility, which Hume quickly discards, is that the necessary transition from cause to effect is the result of merely observing multiple instances of the contiguity and succession of objects. Each experience of conjunction is the same as the last and no matter how many of them are accumulated, nothing new is ever garnered from them.⁴⁴

Reason (or the understanding) is also incapable of being the source of the customary transition from cause to effect:

If reason determin'd us, it wou'd 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.*⁴⁵

I follow Stroud in calling the italicized portion the “uniformity principle.”⁴⁶ By Hume’s lights, it is clear that we cannot come to the uniformity principle via demonstrative reasoning, as we can easily “conceive a change in the course of nature,” and anything that we can conceive cannot be absolutely (or logically) impossible.⁴⁷ We also cannot arrive at that principle via probable reasoning. Any attempt to do so would itself presume the uniformity principle as a premise, but “[t]he same principle cannot be both the cause and effect of another.”⁴⁸ Since the uniformity principle cannot be derived from observation, demonstration, or probable reasoning, it must be through the imagination and not the understanding that we come to the idea of necessary connection, and, thus, our idea of causation rests not on reason but on the association of ideas in the imagination.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.3.6.3; SBN 87.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.3.6.4; SBN 88.

⁴⁶ *Hume*, 54.

⁴⁷ *T*, 1.3.6.5; SBN 89.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1.3.6.7; SBN 89.

The outcome of this negative argument can be made even more explicit if one keeps Lockean reason in mind. In order to make the causal inference from object A to object F, one must be able to reason – demonstratively or probably – from A to F via an unspecified number of intermediate ideas. Some of these ideas will be of past experiences of the constant conjunction of A and F, but this alone is not enough to get from A to F in the present case. No matter how many past instances are surveyed, nothing more is learned from them. Each instance merely shows us that objects A and F have relations of contiguity and succession.⁴⁹ Another intermediate idea is necessary to complete the inference: the uniformity principle. Proceeding from A, through the ideas of past experiences of constant conjunction and the idea that the future resembles the past (the uniformity principle), one can finally arrive at F because one can perceive the relations of each idea to those preceding and following it in the chain. But from where does the uniformity principle arise? According to Hume, it cannot arise from demonstrative reasoning, because we can always imagine a contrary outcome, e.g., we can imagine the billiard ball in motion coming to a sudden stop upon striking a second ball. The uniformity principle also cannot arise from probable reasoning. If one attempts to reason to the uniformity principle from past experiences of the future (or present) resembling the past, one must again proceed in this chain of ideas through the uniformity principle itself. Thus, the argument is hopelessly circular.

Probable reasoning is built on the uniformity principle, but Locke has no way to account for this idea of the future's resemblance to the past. What Hume has shown

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.3.6.3; SBN 87.

primarily with this argument is not that the beliefs formed by Lockean reason are somehow unjustified, but that Lockean reason cannot even begin to function because the inference from a present impression to its causal attendant is impossible without the uniformity principle, which cannot be derived from observation or reason, which are the only sources of ideas available to Locke.

A further result of this, which is taken as central by the global skeptic, is that reason has lost its source of justification. Taking it to be an independently functioning, higher cognitive faculty that functions by the intuitive perception of agreement or disagreement between ideas, most early modern thinkers understood reason as a fundamental explanatory principle in itself that granted positive normative status to beliefs. “With few exceptions early modern philosophers from Descartes through to Reid had an antecedent commitment to the notion that the higher cognitive faculties are truth-generating and truth-preserving.”⁵⁰ By demonstrating that neither reason nor observation can provide the necessary grounds for causal reasoning, Hume has undermined the warrant of reason and the justification of beliefs because he has shown that reason must rely on some other faculty for its foundations. The global skeptic is not wrong in pronouncing this, but goes too far by claiming it as Hume’s central concern. The normative outcome of Hume’s negative argument does not begin to worry him until *T* 1.4.7 and is not thoroughly addressed until *EHU*.

At the end of the argument of *T* 1.3.6, Hume is concerned only to show that reason cannot function as Locke claimed that it did. Unable to arrive at the idea of

⁵⁰ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 6n.; citing Falkenstein and Easton (1997), p. iii.

necessary connection either by observation or demonstrative or probable reason, we seem to be left with no means whatsoever to begin the process of reasoning. This is a clearly unsavory position, as we would be hard pressed to find anyone who thinks that we cannot and do not form any beliefs about future events as the result of observing present circumstances, even if there is a great degree of contention over the normative status of such beliefs. Given this negative argument, it is this question “of how we come by beliefs in the unobserved *at all*” that concerns Hume the most.⁵¹ Unlike his immediate predecessors, Hume refuses to consider talk of faculties as the ground floor of explanation regarding cognitive processes. He uses terms such as “reason” and “understanding” only for ease of exposition, but his account relies on “only ideas, impressions, and the ways they interact” to explain how these now pseudo-faculties function.⁵² As I am about to show, by appeal to these much broader principles Hume is able to explain how beliefs about the unobserved are formed in the mind, while Locke’s account cannot.

Without appealing to faculty talk, Hume offers an account of reason that calls on only the association of ideas by a certain set of principles of the imagination, which he has taken up to do his explanatory work right from the start.⁵³ This account, which I follow Owen in calling ‘Hume’s reason,’ is an outgrowth of Hume’s theory of ideas. Though this is a well known bit of Humean theory, I think it will be helpful at this point to offer a brief review.

⁵¹ Ibid., 137.

⁵² Ibid., 76.

⁵³ Ibid., 75.

Hume adapts his theory of ideas from Locke's without much fanfare or criticism.⁵⁴ According to the theory, to have any thought, sensory perception, or feeling is to have a *perception* before one's mind. Perceptions, that is, are the building blocks of our cognitive, perceptual, and emotional experiences, and, without them we would have no thoughts or experiences at all. Perceptions come in two flavors: *impressions* and *ideas*. The first of these – impressions – are the entrance of the world into the mind and are characterized by a high degree of force and vivacity. The second – ideas – are the weaker copies of impressions and, thus, exhibit a lesser degree of force and vivacity. Impressions and ideas, furthermore, come in a one-to-one ratio in the mind.⁵⁵ For every simple idea there is, somewhere in the subject's experiential history, a correspondent simple impression that gave rise to it. From this Hume gets his method of tracing ideas back to their origins in impressions, the guiding technique of most of his theorizing.⁵⁶

Hume also tells us that ideas, once they have entered into the mind, become separated by the imagination and can be rearranged and reconnected in whatever manner the imagination pleases. This does not happen willy-nilly, however; there is a “gentle force, which commonly prevails” in guiding the imagination's whim. This gentle force is the natural association of ideas in the imagination with regards to resemblance, contiguity (both spatial and temporal), and cause and effect.⁵⁷ By these three relations, the mind organizes ideas and puts them to use. One idea may connect to others in the imagination

⁵⁴ Stroud, *Hume*, 17.

⁵⁵ This is the case, at least, when we consider simple impressions and simple ideas, on Hume's theory.

⁵⁶ *T*, 1.1.1.1-12; SBN 1-7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.1.4.1; SBN 10.

by having some sort of resemblance with it, by having been experienced in close spatiotemporal proximity to it, or by being taken as its cause or effect.

A careful distinction is in order here. These are not the only relations between ideas for Hume, but they are the only natural associations between them. At *T* 1.3.1.1, Hume introduces the philosophical relations: “*resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, contrariety, and causation.*”⁵⁸ The natural associations are repeated here, but there is a key difference. The philosophical relations advanced in “Of knowledge” are employed through intentional actions of the mind on the part of the subject in the process of reasoning, while the natural relations occur spontaneously as the result of the work of the imagination.⁵⁹ If one thinks of reason in the Lockean sense and considers the movement from premise to conclusion via a series of intermediate ideas, one makes each of the connections between ideas in this chain by these philosophical relations.⁶⁰ The natural associations, however, function at the level of the imagination and serve only to connect ideas without the employment of reason proper. Here, however, is the important point: according to the account of Hume’s reason advanced here, the former of these – philosophical relations – rely on the latter – natural associations – for their existence. The sort of reasoning that

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.3.1.1; SBN 69.

⁵⁹ Spontaneous may be a somewhat misleading word choice. I will return to the question in Section IV of how one can control, to some degree, the function of these natural relations when it comes to reflective reasoning.

⁶⁰ The aim of *T* 1.3.1 is to show that if one employs the relations of identity, time and place, and contrariety, one must appeal to experience and, thus, proceed only by probable reasoning. Whereas, if one employs the other four relations, one may do so by appealing only to the ideas themselves, thus maintaining a degree of certainty worthy of being called demonstrative reasoning or knowledge.

relies on philosophical associations would not be possible if the imagination didn't already function by the natural association of ideas.

The chief philosophical relation by which probable reasoning proceeds is that of cause and effect. Cause and effect rests on the idea of necessary connection, which in turn rests on the experience of constant conjunction and something like the uniformity principle. Hume's negative argument of *T* 1.3.6 argues that the uniformity principle cannot be attained via reason. What Hume needs for this stage of his argument is an explanation of how probable reason functions, and this explanation requires an explanation of the origin (the impression) of the uniformity principle. His explanation of its origin relies wholly on the natural association of ideas through causation.

When one encounters multiple instances of A and B in close relationships of contiguity and succession, by the natural association of ideas called causation, one will come to the belief that A causes B. This belief is not the result of reasoning from constant conjunction to causation, but, instead, this inference – if one can even call it that – proceeds *reflexively* by the natural association of causation in the imagination. A reflexive act of the imagination upon being appeared to with the constant conjunction of A and B, gives rise to the belief that A causes B. This is what Hume refers to variously as “custom” or “habit;” it is the propensity of the imagination to make this inference “before we have time for reflection.” This *is* Hume's ground floor of explanation; the mind is wired in such a way that upon being presented with an experience of constant conjunction, it draws an immediate and reflexive inference to the belief of a necessary

connection between the objects of the conjunction.⁶¹ This does not proceed by the interposition of intermediate ideas, but by an act of the imagination that associates A with B.⁶² Reflexive reasoning is not reason in the Lockean sense, but is only the natural association of ideas by cause and effect.

Once this natural association has done its work, and one has arrived at the idea of the uniformity principle, one can then employ old Lockean (and Humean) probable reasoning. Having observed constant conjunctions in the world and having come to the idea of necessary connection through custom, one can form the idea of the uniformity principle, and, upon this ground, can undertake traditional reflective reasoning. It is only, however, by the good fortune of the natural association of cause and effect that one can arrive at this stage. Hume has rebutted the negative argument posed in *T* 1.3.6 by appealing to the explanatory principles of the imagination that he posits in the first part of Book 1 of the *Treatise*.⁶³ As soon as Hume offers this explanation of the origin of probable beliefs, however, a new problem becomes evident to him. Since the application of our mental faculties is always fallible, he wonders in “Of scepticism with regard to reason,” why does belief not dissolve entirely into uncertainty? Before he can begin to explore the normative aspects of belief formation, Hume must first undertake the daunting task of explaining the persistence of beliefs in our minds.

The argument of *T* 1.4.1 has become notorious for its seemingly inescapable skeptical results. According to the argument, when one makes a judgment, whether it is

⁶¹ Ibid., 1.3.8.13; SBN 103.

⁶² Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 149-50. Cf. 168-71.

⁶³ Ibid., 168-71.

by demonstrative or probable reasoning, one ought to account for any possible error in the original judgment by a second-order judgment, and correct that judgment by a third-order judgment, and so on *ad infinitum*.⁶⁴ Each successive judgment diminishes by small degrees one's belief about the probability of the correctness of the original belief by undermining the evidence in that belief's favor. Thus, even the most certain beliefs of mathematics are diminished to the most minute subjective probabilities by successive judgments of the fallibility of our belief forming faculties.

In reading this argument, the global skeptic sees Hume as advancing two epistemic norms: 1) "we ought always to correct our first judgment" and 2) "we are oblig'd by reason to estimate the probability of error." If these norms are followed in all our reasoning, the global skeptic argues, then the clear result is that we have no reasons at all in support of any of our beliefs. In correcting our first judgment in any instance we must do so by admitting the possibility of error, but then we must also admit of this same possibility in our second judgment, and so on *ad infinitum*. This argument, they claim, undermines entirely the justification of all beliefs, both demonstrative and probable.⁶⁵ The global skeptic sees Hume's argument as an attack on the possibility of justified belief on the Lockean account and takes it as Hume's final word on this subject. Proponents of the CE view, however, urge that the negative argument of *T* 1.4.1 be understood in

⁶⁴ In paragraph five of the present section, Hume seems to contradict himself in saying first that "we ought always to correct the first judgment" and then that the judgment is "liable to a new correction by a reflex act of the mind." The first statement implies that there is a choice whether this second-order judgment is made, the second that it proceeds reflexively without the active participation of the cognizer. Whichever is the case, my argument will proceed in the same manner. The point is that in either case, reason taken to its natural conclusions will diminish belief to the slightest probability. Once this has happened, whether by choice or not, one's beliefs should cease to exist.

⁶⁵ Meeker, "Is Hume's Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?," 135-6.

context . In advancing this view, I claim that when this argument is properly understood it is seen to be a step in Hume's argument for the inadequacy of the Lockean account of belief and near wholly unconcerned with the normative aspects of reason.

On the CE view, Hume's concern in this argument can be summarized in a simple question. Given the force of this skeptical argument, which undermines the classic source of justification for our beliefs, Hume wants to know “[*h*]ow it happens, that even after all we retain a degree of belief, which is sufficient for our purpose, either in philosophy or common life?”⁶⁶ If one is being reasonable – on either the Lockean or Humean account – one should proportion one's beliefs to the evidence. The *T* 1.4.1 negative argument purports to show that no evidence is sufficient to serve as the reason for one's holding a belief, therefore, one should hold no beliefs. But, Hume notices, we obviously do hold many beliefs. The Lockean account of reason fails to provide an explanation of why this is so, but Hume thinks that he can provide just such an explanation on his account by showing that the assent one gives to a belief is divorced from the reasons one has in support of that belief.

By Hume's lights, the assent one gives to a belief is nothing but a product of the force and vivacity of that belief. This force and vivacity is imparted on a belief by the present impression that served as the beginning of the chain of reasoning that begat the belief. As is so often observed with Hume, this process functions in a fashion similar to Newtonian physical laws. The present impression, being causally connected to an idea in one's mind by the natural association of ideas, comes into contact with that idea and

⁶⁶ *T*, 1.4.1.9; SBN 184.

imparts a degree of force and vivacity to it that is greater than that with which a mere idea appears to the mind. This enlivened idea is all that a belief truly is.⁶⁷

What Hume must do in order to explain the persistence of beliefs in the face of the skeptical argument is to show that one's acceptance of the norms prescribed in the argument does not lead to the diminishing of the force and vivacity of one's beliefs.

Hume explains why the negative argument fails to diminish force and vivacity by appeal to a "trivial property of the fancy:"⁶⁸

After the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho' the principles of judgment, and the balancing of opposite causes be the same as at the very beginning; yet their influence on the imagination, and the vigor they add to, or diminish from the thought, is by no means equal. Where the mind reaches not its objects with easiness and facility, the same principles have not the same effects as in a more natural conception of ideas; nor does the imagination feel a sensation, which holds any proportion with that which arises from its common judgments and opinions.⁶⁹

The argument of T 1.4.1 would have us engage in a long chain of reasoning in order to reach its skeptical results, but as a result of this "trivial property" the mind cannot maintain an argument that is so far removed from the force and liveliness of impressions. When an argument leads one this far astray of the present impressions, it very quickly begins to lack efficacy, and the force of the original belief is not diminished by the argument.

By appealing to the force and vivacity of beliefs and this "trivial property of the fancy," Hume has shown that his "intention...in displaying so carefully the arguments of this fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of [his] hypothesis, *that*

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1.3.8.11; SBN 103.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.4.7.7; SBN 267.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1.4.1.10; SBN 185.

all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures."⁷⁰ Hume's concern in this argument has not been the justification of beliefs, as the global skeptic would have us believe, but has, instead, been showing that his account surpasses the Lockean account in explaining why beliefs persist in the face of this skeptical argument and also defending his thesis that reason is in an important way sensitive rather than cognitive. The argument of *T* 1.4.1 advances Hume's explanatory account of the functioning of reason at the neglect of the normative questions of belief, which do not begin to concern him until later in his project.⁷¹ Of course this argument shows justification to be lacking on the Lockean account, and Hume will later come to understand that it does on his, as well. He does not, however, even begin to address this concern in *T* 1.4.1, as it is not the aim of his account at this point.

Both the arguments of *T* 1.3.6 and *T* 1.4.1 seem to offer support for a skeptical reading of Hume's epistemology. If one reads them with an account of reason in mind that is not Hume's own and with an eye toward normativity and not explanation, it is easy to see how global skepticism appears to be the outcome of these arguments. According to the CE view, however, Hume is not centrally concerned at this point with the justification of beliefs or the warrant of reason. Instead, he is offering these two negative arguments in order to further develop his own account of reason, which is constructed on his basic principles of the natural association of ideas in the imagination. The negative argument at *T* 1.3.6 allows Hume to demonstrate that on his account we can explain causal reasoning

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1.4.1.8; SBN 190.

⁷¹ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 178.

by explaining the genesis of our belief in the uniformity principle through appeal to the natural association of ideas by causation, i.e., custom or habit. Thus, he can proclaim that reason is merely the result of a certain subset of principles of the imagination, *vis* the natural association of ideas, and that he has “remove[d] all pretext...for asserting that the mind is convic’d by reasoning of that principle, *that instances of which we have no experience, must necessarily resemble those, of which we have.* For we here find, that the understanding or imagination can draw inferences from past experiences, without reflecting on it.”⁷²

The *reductio* argument in “Of skepticism with regard to reason” further develops Hume’s account by strengthening the role of force and vivacity in the genesis and maintenance of beliefs. As has just been shown, Hume argues that beliefs persist against skeptical arguments because the length of the chains of reasoning that lead to skeptical results diminishes their possibly deleterious effects on the liveliness of beliefs. As a result, Hume can state that reason is “*deriv’d from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures.*”⁷³

Hume’s accomplishments in *T* 1.3 and 1.4 are explanatory ones, and it is not until the section titled “Conclusion of this book” that he begins to grapple with the normative problems regarding reason.⁷⁴ Having found that “the memory, senses, and understanding are founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas,”⁷⁵ Hume starts to question the veracity of any beliefs he forms and the usefulness of his philosophizing. He asks,

⁷² *T*, 1.3.8.13; SBN 103.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.1.8; SBN 183.

⁷⁴ Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 206.

⁷⁵ *T*, 1.4.7.3; SBN 265.

“Can I be sure, that in leaving all establish’d opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune shou’d at last guide me on her footsteps”?⁷⁶ Hume’s reason is far removed from the self-warranting, certainty preserving faculty of Lockean reason, and he wonders why he should follow the results he gleans from its application. It is only the association of ideas in the imagination that gives rise to reasoning and a “trivial property of the fancy” that preserves its results. The opinions of common life proceed “merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions.”⁷⁷

In *T* 1.4.7, Hume is struggling with his account and the seemingly tenuous position in which it has left him. He realizes that beliefs have nothing like the warrant of Lockean reason to justify them if belief is simply a function of principles of the imagination. Out of this realization rises a dilemma. On the first horn he sees that if we accept “every trivial suggestion of the fancy,” we will find ourselves holding many contradictory beliefs and “such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham’d of our credulity.”⁷⁸ On the second horn, if we limit our beliefs to only those ideas enlivened by “the general and more established properties of the imagination,” reason destroys itself, as was shown in *T* 1.4.1. In order to save reason, we must admit that “seemingly trivial property of the fancy” that diminishes the force of long and complex arguments, but if we admit this, then, “by a parity of reason” we must admit all of the trivialities of the imagination. And, furthermore, if it is admitted that

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.4.7.6; SBN 267.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

sophisticated arguments cannot have any sway on the mind, then we have immediately contradicted ourselves because we have arrived at this conclusion by just such an argument. It seems to Hume that he has stumbled on a genuine dilemma and, thus, he pronounces that “[w]e have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all.”⁷⁹

Given the choice between false reason, i.e., reason that functions by the natural association of ideas and the “trivial property of the fancy,” and none at all, which is Hume’s allusion to Lockean reason confronted with his negative arguments, Hume will choose the former. This choice is not merely pragmatic since it is not really false reason with which he is left but reason situated in a sentient being. Impressions come from all around us in the form of sensory perceptions but also as sentiments. The force and vivacity of belief is just another sensation that we feel, though it is one that ultimately guides our actions in the fulfillment of our desires. Nature has situated reason in this fashion to guide the course of our thought, dispel the clouds of radical skepticism, and direct us towards pleasant outcomes in our actions.⁸⁰ A choice of this false reason is dictated by nature itself and leads us well in daily life.

Choosing the path of false reason is demanded by nature, and in this respect Hume is again offering an explanatory account of the resolution to his dilemma. This explanation, however, does not yet address the normative question of *why we ought to choose to accept the deliverances of reason*; it only shows that we have no choice but to do so. If reason is taken to be a good guide for our thoughts and actions because nature

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.4.7.7; SBN 267.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1.4.7.9-13; SBN 269-71.

has demanded that we accept it as such, Hume's self-doubt about whether he is following truth remains unsuppressed. At one point, he even goes so far as to say that truth "perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for."⁸¹ Because he cannot assure himself that it is aimed toward truth, Hume cannot answer the question of why we ought to accept the deliverances of reason above those of other functions of the imagination if reason is founded on the same associations of ideas as the others. This query is left unanswered at the end of *Treatise* Book 1, and, instead, Hume determines to continue on with his philosophizing with the faith that nature is leading him aright.⁸²

Though this is the all of Hume's feeble attempt at addressing the normativity of epistemology in the *Treatise*, it is not all he has to say on the topic. The explanatory account offered in the *Treatise* that I have expounded thus far has opened the door for an account of the normative dimensions of Hume's epistemology to be sought elsewhere in his writings.⁸³ I take myself to have shown at this point that Hume did not concern himself with the justification of beliefs in the unobserved nor with the warrant of reason in his negative and positive arguments in *T* 1.3 and 1.4. It must be admitted, however, that he has undermined reason as it was understood by his predecessors, and, in doing so, he has removed its traditional justificatory foundations. He has provided a new description of how reason functions, but he has yet to lay forth any grounds on which it may be regarded as warranted; this question is left wide open.⁸⁴ In the next section, I begin to dig more deeply into the normative questions that arise out of Hume's

⁸¹ Ibid., 1.4.7.14; SBN 272.

⁸² Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 199-206.

⁸³ Ibid., 197.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 136-7.

explanatory account of reason. I show that there are two levels of normativity, each of which is an important facet of Hume's overall epistemological account, and explore Owen's attempt to account for normativity in Hume. In Section V, I follow Owen's lead in turning to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in order to develop my own account of Hume's warrant, which closely parallels the causal epistemology of Alvin Goldman.

IV. Unanswered Normative Questions in the *Treatise*

Up to this point I have been arguing that, contrary to the global skepticism account outlined in the second section of this paper, Hume is not centrally concerned with the justification of beliefs or the warrant of reason in the epistemology he offers in *T* 1.3 and 1.4. Instead, he is quite concerned with arguing, *contra* Locke, that we are “not determined by reason”⁸⁵ when we form beliefs about the unobserved and that reason, when considered as a separate faculty, entirely subverts itself. Having shown this, Hume turns his attention to explaining “the origin and persistence of beliefs”⁸⁶ through appeal only to the natural associations of ideas in the imagination as explanatory principles, i.e., only to custom or habit. Having supplied an account of reason that explains the genesis and persistence of beliefs that demurs from the truth-preserving accounts of reason found in Locke and others, Hume is left with a rather weighty set of normative questions. As I pointed out in the previous section, these questions only briefly come into the open in the final section of *Treatise* Book 1, but they get much more thorough attention from Hume in *EHU*.⁸⁷ My aim in this section is to develop these normative questions and show the failure of Owen’s account to satisfactorily address them.

⁸⁵ *T*, 1.3.6.12; SBN 92.

⁸⁶ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 197.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

The first normative question is that of rationality. Hume endorses a number of epistemic norms that require the believer to conform her beliefs to the available evidence and, thus, form them in a fashion that best accords with his account of reason. This constraint on rationality is only sensible if Humean belief formation is a process in which we have some degree of agency. The causal account Hume gives, however, seems quite deterministic; the challenge is to explain a role for rationality within the confines of this causal account of belief formation. The second question, which I take up as my central concern, is that of the warrant of reason: why ought we conform to epistemic norms of rationality and choose the deliverances of reason over those of other functions of the imagination if every function of the imagination is simply an application of the natural associations of ideas? In pursuit of this goal, I enlist the aid of Owen's account of Hume's normativity offered in the final chapter of *Hume's Reason*, but, I argue, his account leaves us wanting with respect to warrant because it fails to address the common intuition that reason ought to provide us with reliably true beliefs. The final sections of this paper address that deficit.

The first level of normativity in Hume's epistemology is quite different from that which most often concerns contemporary epistemologists in search of criteria of justification or warrant. What I call the *rationality constraint* consists in differentiating the correct from the incorrect employment of reason as well as those beliefs formed by reason from those enlivened by other functions of the imagination.⁸⁸ Hume spends a good deal of space expounding his thoughts on rationality in *T* 1.3, e.g., in "Of the effects of

⁸⁸ I also refer to the rationality constraint as "rationality" or "reasonableness" when these terms better fit the context of discussion.

other relations and other habits” and “Of the unphilosophical probability” and near the end of *T* 1.3 where he offers his “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” as a guide to reasoning properly. These sections each attempt to show in their own way that there are right and wrong ways of going about reasoning just as there are right and wrong ways of throwing a baseball or writing a sentence. Human practices are governed by implicit and explicit norms that guide us in performing actions directed at the specific goals of each practice. Regarding rationality, the rules of reasoning that Hume tries to make explicit are intended to guide us in forming beliefs in accord with reason because, on Hume’s account of warrant, these beliefs will most closely track the objects as they actually exist in the world, i.e., following these norms ensures that we achieve true beliefs that most advantageously guide our actions.

Thomas Hearn provides the classic account of how general rules function to yield rational beliefs on Hume’s theory. According to Hearn, there are two kinds of general rules operating in the *Treatise*.⁸⁹ The first, derived from the effects of custom and resemblance on the imagination, amount to a “generalizing propensity of the imagination which extends the scope of judgments or opinions under certain conditions.”⁹⁰ By this generalizing propensity Hume explains how we can form causal beliefs the first time we encounter a new object as well as how we come to prejudicial beliefs. The second sort of general rules operate not by “mere propensity” but in a reflective manner to correct the application of the first.⁹¹ These rules are derived empirically and via the understanding by

⁸⁹ ““General Rules” in Hume’s *Treatise*,” 405-6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 408.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

surveying our experiences in past judgments and serve a “corrective, reflective and directive” function in the formation of rational beliefs.⁹² The first kind of general rules are those followed by the vulgar, the second by philosophers.⁹³

Owen, for his part, picks up Hearn’s account and deftly handles an oft leveled criticism of it. According to what has been said thus far, Hume’s reason functions causally in at least two ways. First, it is only by the natural association of ideas by causation that the mind comes to the idea of the uniformity principle. Second, it is a causal relationship between impressions and their causally attendant ideas that enlivens those ideas to the level of belief. Causation, so long as there are no impeding factors, is the paradigm of a deterministic process. Considering one billiard ball striking another, *ceteris paribus*, the struck ball will take to motion at a speed and in a direction proportional to the striking ball in every instance. There is no possibility for deviation. This being the case, one must ask how it is that Hume can offer rules by which we ought to engage in the *causally deterministic* process of reasoning. How can we have any agency if the outcome is a determinant one depending only on circumstances outside of our control? This seems like a difficult question, but if we look at the rules for judging of causes and effects that Hume lays out in *T* 1.3.15 a fairly simple answer can be gleaned. Hume’s rules for determining causes and effects tell us *which instances we must consider* when we employ reason and not how to reason *per se*. This distinction is important because it allows that reason may operate causally, but agency may be involved in

⁹² Ibid., 411.

⁹³ For a further development of Hearn’s account see, Martin (1993).

varying the inputs we consider by directing our attention to some past cases rather than others.

Suppose, for example, that I have had very little experience with pink billiard balls. In fact, my only experience of a pink billiard ball was once when a magician held one out in front of herself at arm's length, released it, and it hovered in midair. Now, confronted again with an impression of a pink billiard ball about to be dropped, I may form the belief on the application of the first sort of general rules that it will hover at the height at which it is released. This is, of course, an absurd belief, but how could I have formed a different one? On the account that Owen gives, I could have formed a different belief had I considered a different set of past experiences. "We cannot vary the mechanism," he writes, "but we can vary the input."⁹⁴ As with visual perception, where I might choose what I see only by turning my gaze to and fro, so it is with reason. I can vary the beliefs I come to only by focusing my attention on some past experiences rather than others. The eight rules at *T* 1.3.15 are derived by Hume from reflection on past judgments, i.e., from an application of Hume's second sort of general rules, to aid us in judging which apparent causes and effects housed in our past experiences are efficacious and which are merely accidental. Upon consideration, these rules should remind me that I ought to consider all similar objects, and not be distracted by the color of the ball, which past experience has shown to be inefficacious with regards to the law of gravity.⁹⁵ Based

⁹⁴ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 216.

⁹⁵ *T*, 1.3.15.3-10; SBN 173-4.

on my experiences with all colors of billiard balls, I should reason *that the ball will drop when it is released*.⁹⁶

The rationality constraint corrects both for beliefs that have not been formed by reason at all – but are really ideas enlivened by other functions of the imagination – and for beliefs formed by a misapplication of reason or by appeal to the first sort of general rules. Suppose, for example, that I have come to believe that Friday the 13th is an unlucky day as the result of being told repeatedly and over an expanse of time that this is so. On Hume’s account, this pseudo-belief cannot be differentiated in a meaningful way from a causal belief except by its origins. The Friday the 13th belief, just like a causal belief, is an idea with greater force and vivacity, but it has been enlivened by indoctrination and not reason, i.e., constant repetition has given force and vivacity to the idea.⁹⁷ This is a case of unreasonable belief where reason has not come into play at all, but Hume gives other examples in which reason has simply been mis-applied. For instance, he discusses occasions of prejudice in which the Irishman’s wit and the Frenchman’s solidity are systematically doubted.⁹⁸ In these cases, one engages in a sort of causal reasoning in connecting Irishness with lack of wit or Frenchness with cowardice, but, Hume tells us, the causal connection taken to hold in these cases is based on very little or irrelevant past experience. These are the results, that is, of the first application of general rules not corrected by reflection. One could withhold belief in cases of both indoctrination and

⁹⁶ See also, *T* 1.3.13.11; SBN 149. The general rules teach us “to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes.”

⁹⁷ This sort of indoctrination is what Hume refers to as education (*T* 1.3.9.17-19; SBN 116-7), though one would hope that this is not all that goes on in our classrooms. He argues that the constant “repetition of any idea infixes it in the imagination” with the same force and vivacity as a belief.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.3.13.7; SBN 146.

prejudice by reflectively examining them and considering the fit of the past experiences considered with the epistemic norms Hume makes explicit at *T* 1.3.15.

It is important to note that in these cases, according to Hume, we are not adjudicating between beliefs and some categorically different entities. Beliefs are “individually the same” with enlivened ideas, hence every enlivened idea whether its vivacity derives causally from reason or from something like repetition is possibly equal to a well formed belief in its effects on the mind.⁹⁹ Education (and, presumably, prejudice) is rejected because it “is an artificial and not a natural cause, and its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves at different times and places.” “In reality [however, education is] built on the same foundation of custom and repetition as our experience or reasonings from causes and effects.”¹⁰⁰ The question now is why we and the philosophers reject these other sources of enlivened ideas in favor of reason if each of them functions by the same natural propensities.

There are numerous possibilities for responding to this question. One common response is that of global skepticism, which I have already briefly discussed. According to this response, the privileging of reason is simply not warranted, i.e., there is no good reason for our accepting the deliverances of reason over those of prejudice, education, or reason’s misapplication. Kevin Meeker, attributing something like a justified true belief account of knowledge to Hume, argues that, whether or not it was intended, Hume’s negative arguments show justification to be impossible.¹⁰¹ He writes,

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.3.9.17; SBN 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.3.9.19; SBN 117.

¹⁰¹ “Hume: Radical Skeptic or Naturalized Epistemologist?,” 34.

[I]nsofar as epistemic justification only attaches to beliefs that we have good reason to think are true...no belief can be epistemically justified because we have no reason (i.e., no evidence) to think that any of our beliefs are true.¹⁰²

The argument of *T* 1.4.1 shows that our beliefs lack evidential grounds in that we are forced by epistemic norms to doubt any beliefs that we might have accepted all the way down to our most basic beliefs. The force of any evidence that would be required for our beliefs to be justified is thus diminished to next to nothing. Furthermore, according to the global skeptic, Hume's attempt to save himself from this skeptical conclusion fails to show anything more than "that nature...forces us to believe;" it does not show that we have any sort of justification for those beliefs, i.e., that we have any evidence capable of supporting them.¹⁰³

An important point of what Meeker wants to claim is that, on Hume's account, we not only lack knowledge-as-certainty (demonstrative knowledge) but knowledge as construed on the contemporary justified true belief account (hereafter JTB; we could call this justified probable belief, perhaps), as well.¹⁰⁴ He claims that Hume, beyond showing certainty to be unachievable, also demonstrates at *T* 1.4.1 that justification is an impossibility, and, therefore, that none of our beliefs – even those that amount only to opinion or probable belief – may be justifiedly assented to, i.e., that Hume is a global skeptic.

Meeker's argument for global skepticism is implicitly internalist. He claims that "epistemic justification only attaches to beliefs that we have good reason to think are

¹⁰² Ibid., 37.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 47.

true,” and that the grounds for thinking a belief to be true are the evidence we have for that belief.¹⁰⁵ This must be correct at some level. We obviously shouldn’t take beliefs to be true unless we do have evidence in support of them, and Hume’s many admonitions to proportion belief to the evidence can be read as confirmation of his adherence to this view. Hume’s negative arguments seem to undermine any evidential grounds for belief, and thus seem to have skeptical outcomes even if he can explain how beliefs come to be and persist by appeal to custom. Because we could not have any evidence that custom functions in a way that provides true beliefs, we could never be justified in accepting beliefs formed via custom. This account is internalist in that it demands that each of us be able to access each bit of evidence that functions as a justifier of our beliefs. If there is something beyond our ken, such as custom, that is productive of our beliefs, we could never be justified in holding them because we could never justifiably believe that custom provides any privileged link to the world.

The argument of *T* 1.4.1 leads to skepticism given the assumptions that no internal source of justification or evidence for one’s beliefs is available and that no external source would suffice. In what follows, I argue that Hume rejects this internalism. His appeal to custom should be read, I think, as an attempt to escape the regress inherent in internalist epistemologies. In the positive accounts of *T* 1.3 and 1.4, however, he fails to offer an argument for how the justification of beliefs is possible. He remedies this deficit in *EHU* by appealing to an externalist account of warrant.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 37.

David Owen rejects the global skepticism view of Hume's epistemology and attempts his own account of Humean warrant. He argues, as I've shown, that the accounts in Book 1 of the *Treatise* are concerned with the explanation of the origin and persistence of our beliefs and not with their justification. Owen looks elsewhere in Hume for an account of the warrant of reason, but he does not make the full turn away from internalism. In Section I of *EHU*, Owen discovers what he takes to be a pragmatic account of warrant. He writes,

Hume's ultimate defence of philosophy, and the preference for reason, is that those who practice it have the virtue of reasonableness: they themselves are happier and better off, and more useful to society. We morally approve of the wise and reasonable person.¹⁰⁶

This is a promising turn, as it attaches to Hume's explanatory account an account of why beliefs formed by reason should be accepted over deliverances of other functions of the imagination. Owen's reading is still internalist in that it provides an account of warrant to which each of us could have cognitive access: reason is warranted because its outcomes are useful. I have experienced those outcomes as useful, and thus am justified in taking reason, which functions by custom, to be warranted. I argue, however, that this reading fails on two counts. First, Hume's argument, as Owen reads it, turns out to be circular. Second, while it explains that reason is useful in guiding our lives, it fails to take into account the role of reason in providing *true* beliefs, a factor of importance in Hume's theory.

Hume indeed spends a great deal of the first section of *EHU* defending philosophy (and natural philosophy) as worthwhile endeavors. Philosophy, he tells us, "if

¹⁰⁶ *Hume's Reason*, 212.

carefully cultivated by several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling.”¹⁰⁷ The general, the politician, the lawyer, and even whole governments benefit from the works of philosophers in becoming more accurate in their crafts. An understanding of human nature, that which Hume seeks, is valuable to all the sciences and to the undertakings of many professions.¹⁰⁸ This, Owens wants us to believe, is Hume’s offering for the warrant of reason: that the manner of thinking endorsed by philosophy is beneficial in many walks of life.

Even if it is found that reason is not necessarily beneficial in all walks of life, Hume argues, at least it is not so dangerous as other pursuits of the mind. In the *Treatise* he “make[s] bold to recommend philosophy, and [does] not scruple to give it the preference to superstition,” because:

[S]uperstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions. Philosophy on the contrary, if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities...Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.¹⁰⁹

Hume thus proclaims philosophical pursuits to be both less dangerous and often advantageous for both the individual doing philosophy and for society as a whole. We should, it seems, choose to pursue philosophy and to be reasonable because our

¹⁰⁷ Hume, *EHU*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 220; Hume, *EHU*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ *T*, 1.4.7.13; SBN 271-2.

sentiments lead us to approve of reasonable people and the outcomes of philosophical approaches to life.

Owen only briefly explores this account of warrant gleaned from *EHU*, but here I aim to reconstruct the most plausible reading of it before considering its difficulties. In the opening section of *EHU*, Hume is defending his enterprise against critics and doing so by touting the benefits of the philosophical approach. In order to see how these benefits are taken into consideration, one must appeal to Hume's account of the sentiments and morality, since it is the sentiment of approbation we feel toward the outcomes of reasonable action that is appealed to when we say that reason is virtuous and its outcomes pleasing. At *T* 3.3.1 Hume argues that feelings of moral approbation and displeasure result from each individual's consideration of another from "some *steady* and *general* points of view."¹¹⁰ From this common point of view each of us judges whether the character of another is "naturally fitted to be useful to others, or to the person himself, or [whether it] is agreeable to others, or to the person himself."¹¹¹ The claim that we approve of reasonable people in *EHU* Section I is equivalent to the claim that we experience a moral sentiment of approbation towards the characters of these individuals, finding them to be useful and/or agreeable to others and/or themselves. Reasonableness is, therefore, a virtue and something worthy of emulation on the grounds that we have this sentiment of approbation toward reasonable people. Indeed, Owen claims that philosophy, reason, and skepticism are to be preferred to superstition, bigotry, and

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.3.1.15; SBN 581.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.3.1.30; SBN 590.

dogmatism because “[i]n each case the former is more pleasant and useful to ourselves and others.”¹¹²

Arguing for the warrant of reason, i.e., our preference for it over other functions of the imagination, by appeal to the approval we feel toward the reasonable person seems initially plausible. First, it does not avoid the question at hand and explain yet again why some beliefs are more reasonable than others. It directly confronts the question of why reason should be preferred: we approve of reasonableness in others and desire that approval for ourselves. Second, it fits with Hume’s claims that reason functions well only in a sentient being. Reason alone, as Hume argues in *T* 1.4.7, leaves us with the dilemma of false reason or none at all, but understanding reason as situated in a being governed by sentiments with an imagination that functions by the association of ideas seems to resolve this dilemma. Reason may dissolve beliefs into the most remote probabilities, but it’s saved by the diminishing force of long arguments (a function of the imagination), the pleasure some take in philosophical pursuits, and the approbation we feel toward reasonable people that leads us to tend toward reason ourselves (both of these being functions of the sentiments).

For all its merit, however, this argument is circular. Our approval of reason does not arise out of a mere observance of reasonable action. There is nothing inherent in reason itself that stirs the passions in an approving manner, and nothing that would lead us to label it as virtuous is immediately apparent to us upon the observation of someone engaged in reasoning. Hume distinguishes two manners by which moral sentiments might

¹¹² *Hume's Reason*, 222.

arise. The first is “from the mere species or appearance of characters and passions.” These sentiments are our feelings of approval toward things we judge to have immediate intrinsic value to us, i.e., those of which a mere observance brings us pleasure, e.g., beautiful objects. The second manner is through “reflections on [some objects’] tendency to the happiness of mankind, and of particular persons.”¹¹³ This second manner in which we come to consider something or someone as virtuous requires reflection of the sort that is the home of causal reasoning, and it is only in this manner that we come to approve of reasonableness or rationality and to judge it as a virtue.

I judge someone as virtuous in character and connect that virtuousness to reason by surveying and reflecting on the past deeds of that person. To judge someone’s character as reasonable is to take it that they will continue to be so in the future by applying the uniformity principle, which is derived from the causal association of ideas. Furthermore, to judge pleasing outcomes as the result of reasonableness requires probable reasoning, which calls again on the uniformity principle. I cannot connect the outcomes of reasonable actions with those actions without either probable reasoning or the causal association of ideas. Without custom I could not engage in reasoning, and without reason as a means I could never achieve any judgment of a person’s character at all, let alone a judgment that their reasonableness produces pleasing outcomes in human endeavors. But if the sentiments that lead me to approve of reason above other functions of the imagination themselves rely on reason in their formation, then aren’t our grounds for approving of reason ultimately circular? This surely seems to be the case.

¹¹³ *T*, 3.3.1.27; SBN 589.

There is one possible escape from this unseemly circle that might be available to Owen, though he does not avail himself of it in his own defense of Hume's warrant. Owen makes the distinction between reflexive and reflective reasoning. Reflexive reasoning is the simple causal association of ideas by the imagination, i.e., what I've been calling custom or habit, and reflective reasoning functions via the interposition of intermediate ideas, one of which must be the uniformity principle, which can only be had as the result of reflexive reasoning.¹¹⁴ Owen's account may be concerned with the warrant of only reflective reasoning, since this is the sort that is applied in philosophizing and in most everyday situations. If this is the case, then Owen can argue that reflective reasoning really is self warranting, i.e., one can employ reason to show that reason is virtuous. Reflexive reasoning, which is the source of the uniformity principle, is then just considered a serendipitous psychological phenomenon, which allows us to begin engaging in reflective reasoning. Once one is engaged in reflective reasoning, one is able to look back onto reflexive reasoning and deem its result – the uniformity principle – justified because of the advantageous outcomes it has for human thought and action. This seems a tenuous escape from the circularity of this avenue to the warrant of reason, but it is not necessary to develop it any further as my account does not hinge on its correctness (or incorrectness, as it may be).

Up till now, I have considered warrant in the way Owen frames it: as a justification for our acceptance of beliefs arrived at by reason over deliverances of the other functions of the imagination. There is, however, another dimension to warrant that

¹¹⁴ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 149.

Owen fails to consider. At *T* 180, Hume claims that “[o]ur reason must be consider’d as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect.”¹¹⁵ Though Owen’s account attempts to explain why it is we ought to choose to be reasonable, it does not account in any way for the thought that reason is an avenue to truth. One can imagine a world in which we form consistently false beliefs in accord with reason that nevertheless enable us to function well in the world. Perhaps our minds are controlled by a Cartesian demon, perhaps they are suspended in a vat and fed images electronically, or perhaps evolution worked out in such a way that truth takes a back seat to efficaciousness in terms of survival.¹¹⁶ Reason may, in that case, be our best means for survival and be pragmatically warranted but be entirely unreliable in providing us with true beliefs. Warrant, as it has traditionally been construed, is eminently entangled with the idea of truth. Taking a JTB definition of knowledge, the role that justification or warrant plays is that of showing that we have good reason to think that the true beliefs we hold are indeed true. Hume in no way eschews this role for reason, as is seen in the quote from *T* 1.4.1.1. I urge, therefore, that we ought to again look elsewhere for his account of the warrant of reason. He has not left us, I argue, with only a pragmatic justification for our beliefs. Hume does think that reasoning is a truth-begetting process, and his argument for its warrant, as such, is to be found precisely where one would expect, at the end of *EHU* Section V, wherein he has advanced his “sceptical solution” to the doubts previously raised with regards to reason. In the next section, I take up the account Hume gives in *EHU* Section V and draw

¹¹⁵ *T*, 1.4.1.1; SBN 180.

¹¹⁶ See Plantinga (1993), p. 216-20, for a more thorough discussion of this last possibility.

parallels between it and Goldman's causal epistemology account from his 1967 paper "A Causal Theory of Knowing."

V. An Externalist Alternative

Owen's attempt to define Hume's account of warrant, like that of the global skeptic, is implicitly internalist. A belief is justified if one has formed it according to the application of the second sort of general rules because adherence to these general rules ensures that the belief is formed by reason and not the application of some other less steady and accepted principles of the imagination. Furthermore, justification is the result of reason being warranted in the way described in the previous section. Whether or not one has formed a belief according to these general rules is a fact to which one has epistemic access. Introspection allows one to reflect on the evidence one holds in support of a given belief, and one can carefully question oneself as to whether she has considered all available evidence, the correct set of past experiences, etc.¹¹⁷ The factor that warrants this process of reasoning is also accessible, since it is nothing more than a certain cognitive state of approbation toward reasonableness from which this warrant derives. Though one may not be able to explain the origins of one's sentiments, the having of those sentiments is obviously within one's cognitive grasp.

¹¹⁷ One must be careful here to realize that this does not mean that we will necessarily be able to change our beliefs upon such reflection. There is still the matter of prejudice, education, and like processes that confer a great deal of force and vivacity to ideas, which even careful reasoning may not overcome. This does not mean, however, that we do not have access to the ways we have formed our beliefs nor that we lack an epistemic responsibility to attempt to correct them.

The solution that I offer in this section as a reading of Hume’s account of warrant breaks this internalist mold, which has developed in both skeptical and naturalistic (or explanatory) readings of Humean epistemology. If I can show this reading to be plausible, then Hume does more than part with the rationalistic and earlier empiricist traditions with regards to the foundations of reason. He also prefigures attempts to defend epistemological foundationalism from an externalist perspective nearly 200 years before such theories gained widespread popularity. In eschewing the explanatory value of “faculty talk,” i.e., the widely held early modern belief that the higher cognitive faculties are the ground floor of explanation,¹¹⁸ and the possibility of justifying reason by appealing to reason, Hume constructed an epistemology that remarkably resembles the basic framework of a contemporary, externalist, causal epistemology in its normative aspects and that represents a significant break from the internalist account of Lockean reason.

Before fully developing the CE view in this section, I want to briefly draw a map of the ground this paper has covered and where it is headed. My account of Hume’s epistemology builds on a reading of *T* 1.3 and 1.4 that finds the negative arguments housed in these sections to be directed at the possibility of reason functioning only on the interposition of intermediate ideas and in favor of an explanation of the functioning of reason based on the association of ideas in the imagination. Hume’s argument in these sections ignores the normative questions that usually arise in epistemological discussions. He, instead, focuses on showing his predecessors’ theories of reason to be untenable and

¹¹⁸ Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 85n.

on constructing his own positive account that explains reason's function by appeal to the natural associations of ideas in the imagination. Hume's epistemology explains how it is that we can come to have beliefs in the first place and why they are persistent in the face of skeptical arguments but removes the traditional warrant of reason that was derived, on Locke's account, from its preservation of a degree of certainty and truth through the intuitive perception or presumption of connections between ideas. Hume is left with no account of the justification of beliefs. Reading *T* 1.3 and 1.4 as explanatory accounts that seek to explain how beliefs come to be and how they are maintained but that avoid normative questions serves as a strong argument against those who find a sort of global skepticism supported by these sections and also allows for the freedom to search elsewhere in Hume's corpus for an argument for the warrant of reason.

In this section I will demonstrate how Hume constructs his externalist argument for the warrant of reason. I turn first to Section V of *EHU* and lay the groundwork for Hume's account, which was forecast in the introduction to this paper. I then look to the contemporary causal epistemology offered in an early work of Alvin Goldman in order to draw out the comparison between this contemporary account of warrant and Hume's own. Having shown that it is plausible to read Hume in this way, I proceed to a reconstruction of Hume's normative account, which displays two distinct levels of normativity; the first of these being an internalist account of rationality and the second an externalist account of warrant. I urge that only when these two criteria are met is a belief justified on the Humean account. In the final section of the paper, I examine a critique leveled by Meeker against a similar argument advanced by Dauer and respond to this

criticism while developing a formal account of Hume's epistemology. The goal of this section is to show only that such a reading is eminently plausible, and that it is quite likely that this is what Hume had in mind for his epistemology. My aim here, it should be noted, is not to defend causal epistemology but to argue that Hume espoused something very much like it in *EHU*.

In Section V of *EHU*, Hume rehearses his "sceptical solution" to the problems raised in Section IV regarding the functioning of the understanding. This telling runs along the same lines as the explanatory positive account of *T* 1.3, so it is not necessary to rehash it here. What is importantly different in *EHU*, however, is to be found on the final two pages of the section in a passage that has often been read as a bit of Humean sarcasm. I will let Hume speak first, at length:

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; and though the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with the other works of nature. Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species, and the regulation of our conduct, in every circumstance and occurrence of human life. Had not the presence of an object instantly excited the idea of those objects, so 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; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends.¹¹⁹

In this final passage of his positive account of the operation of reason, precisely where we would expect to find a nod to its warrant, Hume makes a stunning proclamation. Reason,

¹¹⁹ *EHU*, 44-5.

he tells us, is the best guide for our thoughts and actions and most often leads us to truth because it functions in a “pre-established harmony” with the causal powers that act on the objects themselves. Hume’s account of warrant is not the pragmatic account that Owen finds in *EHU* Section I, which argues that we ought to be reasonable and engage in philosophical pursuits because they are useful to others and to ourselves, but ignores the question of the ability of reason to provide true beliefs. Instead, it is an account of warrant that is ultimately concerned with the source of reason’s reliability, and answers the question of justification and warrant in a much more full manner than merely explaining that reason is a pragmatically useful practice.

In interpreting Hume’s account, the first point we should take notice of is this concern with the reliability of reason in truth production. Hume’s first employment of the term ‘knowledge’ in the above passage has often been read as a slip of the pen, i.e., as a common and not a technical use of the term.¹²⁰ We must grant that ‘knowledge’ is not used in this instance to denote knowledge-as-certainty, which is undoubtedly the most technical meaning of the term for Hume. It also, however, is not used willy-nilly. When Hume tells us that “all our knowledge must have been limited to the narrow sphere of our memory and senses,” he is saying that we would not have been able to form any beliefs about the unobserved, but he does not simply say that our beliefs would have been limited as such. Instead, I think, he carefully chooses the term knowledge because he is in this instance explaining that these beliefs are of the sort that we rightly take as true. It is the truth of beliefs that allows for their efficaciousness in adjusting means to ends and in

¹²⁰ See Meeker (2001), for a discussion on Hume’s uses of ‘knowledge’.

producing pleasant outcomes. If this is not enough, Hume claims in nearly as explicit a fashion as he can that custom guides our thought in correspondence with the way that the world actually is. The truth of our beliefs is wholly dependent on their correspondence with the causal regularity of the objects, and it is by custom that this correspondence is maintained and that truth is attained by reason.

Reason achieves this status as the only subset of principles of the imagination capable of attaining true beliefs because of the relationship between custom and causation in the world. As Hume has argued, there are many ways that an idea may be enlivened, but, as previously noted, causation is privileged by Hume, and it is on the association of ideas by causation, i.e., by custom or habit, that reason proceeds. Custom must be understood as one of a small number of “innate propensities, or ‘dispositions to form dispositions.’”¹²¹ When this propensity is activated by the observation of constant conjunction between similar pairs of objects we form “a disposition to reproduce the idea of the one when presented with the impression of the other.”¹²² Reason’s warrant relies on the fact that this disposition to form causal beliefs mirrors causation in the objects.

This explains the warrant of reflexive reasoning, and reflective reasoning is built upon this. When we reason reflectively, so long as we are careful in our adherence to the rules of *T* 1.3.15, we can form beliefs in a carefully causal manner, using the uniformity principle that we arrive at by reflexive reasoning as an intermediate idea. Reasoning in

¹²¹ Dauer, “Hume’s Skeptical Solution and the Causal Theory of Knowledge,” 370; citing Wolff (1966), p. 107.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 371; citing Wolff (1966), p. 127.

this manner maintains the warrant of reflexive reasoning that is derivative of its serendipitous relationship to causation in the world.

Something should also be said about the idea of pre-established harmony. This is a term Hume likely borrows from Leibniz, though it is unclear how well versed the former was in the latter's work.¹²³ Leibniz uses pre-established harmony to refer to the state of affairs that creates the appearance of causation in support of his denial of mind-body interaction:

Leibniz held that no mental state has as a real cause some state of another created mind or body, and no bodily state has as a real cause some state of another created mind or body. Further, every non-initial, non-miraculous, mental state of a substance has as a real cause some previous state of that mind, and every non-initial, non-miraculous, bodily state has as a real cause some previous state of that body. Finally, created minds and bodies are programmed at creation such that all their natural states and actions are carried out in mutual coordination.¹²⁴

Thus, for Leibniz, no body or mind interacts causally with any other body or mind, but the illusion of causation between bodies and between bodies and minds is maintained by the pre-established harmony that is enacted at their creation (hence, by their Creator). Considering Hume's views on religion and the Creator, this is probably not the sense in which Hume employs the term. It seems more plausible that Hume does think that causation occurs between the objects, "though we are ignorant of those powers and forces" that carry this process along, as well as between objects and minds. Harmony in Hume's case is the mind's propensity to reconstruct causation between objects in thought, and is initiated by the impression of an object that is present to one's mind. It is

¹²³ Vasilyev, "Hume: Between Leibniz and Kant (The role of pre-established harmony in Hume's philosophy)," 19-20.

¹²⁴ Kulstad and Carlin, "Leibniz's Philosophy of Mind," Sect. 2.

only because of this propensity that Hume calls “custom” that we can form justified beliefs about the unobserved, i.e., beliefs about causes or effects that are not currently present to our perception. I would note, however, that my argument in no way hinges on this reading of pre-established harmony. If it can be shown that Hume’s sense is the same as Leibniz’, I can consistently accept this without giving up my position. If harmony consists in a pre-set course of events, reason would still be warranted in just the same way by its disposition to go on in thought in the same course as the objects do in the world. All that is required is that nature and thought are appropriately uniform; the mechanism of uniformity is irrelevant.

At this point, I imagine that one might protest that I have offered no account of warrant at all because I have claimed that Hume’s justification of beliefs relies on the fact that there is such a thing as causation in the objects, yet we can know nothing of the essential nature of the objects or the forces between them according to Humean ontological skepticism. This instinctive response to my initial formulation of warrant is a result of the internalist tradition, which has it “that if a belief [is] not immediately justified, it could be justified only if its being justified depend[s] on something else’s being justified.”¹²⁵ Since beliefs about the unobserved, i.e., causal beliefs, are not immediately justified, they can only be justified if their justifier is itself justified. But the account I have offered maintains that causation in the world is at least a part of what justifies our causal beliefs. Our beliefs that causation obtains in the objects and that custom acts in harmony with that causation can in no way be justified on the internalist

¹²⁵ Dauer, “Hume’s Skeptical Solution and the Causal Theory of Knowledge,” 367.

account because no evidence that is itself justified can be stated in support of them. In order to answer this criticism, the doctrine of epistemological externalism must now become central to my defense of the CE view.

I take epistemological externalism to be the position that some or all of the justifiers for a belief are outside of the cognitive grasp or beyond the epistemic access of the believer. Introspection can only get us so far, and “[a]t some point we must rely on things just *being* a certain way, without its also being the case that we do or can assure ourselves that they are that way.”¹²⁶ This may at first seem to be a tenuous position, but it can be made more intuitively acceptable by a very simple example. Imagine that John is a rather uneducated fellow who knows very little about biology and nothing about how his own eyes function. When John proclaims that he sees a red Volkswagen minibus coming down the street, would we claim that his belief that this is so is unjustified because he cannot attest to the veracity of his visual perception? Well, supposing that John has done his level best in assuring himself that he’s not hallucinating (perhaps he thinks about how many drinks he’s had tonight or whether he’s partaken of any illicit substances) and taken other precautions to be sure that he really did see what he thinks he saw, it seems that we would want to claim that John indeed has a justified belief and, if there is really a red minibus, that he *knows* that this is so. John need not have a cognitive grasp on the way his eyes function in order for his belief to be counted as justified; it is simply enough that they do function properly. Dauer puts the intuition behind externalism in relation to Hume very nicely:

¹²⁶ Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, 222.

It may be true that if I were trying to give a *justification* of the claim that we do have knowledge, I would have to justify the assumption that nature is uniform. But the fact that we *do* have knowledge does not depend on our being able to justify the claim that we do have knowledge.¹²⁷

Externalism entails that I can know without being able to know that I know, it rejects the internalist constraint that says that my beliefs are unjustified if I cannot be justified in believing that the process that formed them is justification conferring.

On Hume's account reason is warranted because its operation mirrors causation in the objects, but causation in the objects is not something to which we as humans have epistemic access. In the lengthy quote above Hume draws the analogy between our lack of knowledge about what actuates our muscles and our lack of knowledge of the forces that act on the objects and maintain their uniformity. Neither of these absences of knowledge amounts to a deficiency that prevents us from employing either our limbs or our understanding. The warrant of reason relies on the fact of pre-established harmony and not on our knowledge of the source of that harmony just as locomotion relies on the fact that our muscles actuate in such-and-such a way and not on our knowledge of that actuation.

This sort of externalism is a hallmark of contemporary naturalistic epistemologies, and one of these accounts bears some very close resemblances to Hume's own. Alvin Goldman's 1967 essay, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," provided the

¹²⁷ "Hume's Skeptical Solution and the Causal Theory of Knowledge," 368.

skeleton on which more recent accounts of causal epistemology have been fleshed out.¹²⁸

In this paper Goldman argues for the following formulation:

*S knows that p if and only if
the fact p is causally connected in an “appropriate” way with S’s
believing p.*¹²⁹

The justification of beliefs is thus the product of the fact being believed standing in the right sort of causal relationship to the belief that is held. Goldman develops this account in terms of the believer’s reconstruction of causal chains that mirror those in the world. He explores a number of examples to demonstrate that only when a believer has properly reconstructed the causal chain as it occurs in the world is that believer taken to know the proposition that is believed. The strongest example Goldman provides in support of his thesis is that of S’s belief that a volcano once erupted on a certain countryside:

Suppose that a mountain erupts, leaving lava around the countryside. The lava remains there until S perceives it and infers that the mountain erupted. Then S does know that the mountain erupted. But now suppose that, after the mountain has erupted, a man somehow removes all the lava. A century later, a different man (not knowing of the real volcano) decides to make it look as if there had been a volcano, and therefore puts lava in appropriate places. Still later, S comes across this lava and concludes that the mountain erupted centuries ago. In this case, S cannot be said to know the proposition. This is because the fact that the mountain did erupt is not a cause of S’s believing that it erupted. A necessary condition of S’s knowing that p is that his believing p be connected with p by a causal chain.¹³⁰

In this example, S’s belief that p is the result of S’s mental reconstruction of a causal sequence that likely occurred in the world. However, S lacks justification in the

¹²⁸ This essay appears at the very beginning of Goldman’s career and his positions have evolved significantly since its writing. I feel justified in using this account as a paradigm causal epistemology because it embodies the naturalistic method by which later accounts would proceed. My argument is that Hume’s account parallels this basic method as well as the basic structure Goldman’s thinking in this essay.

¹²⁹ “A Causal Theory of Knowing,” 369.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 361.

second telling because there is no way that S might have accounted for the man who removed the lava, nor for the man who replaced it (one has to marvel at the sheer size of this miniature golf course). Goldman constructs this theory as an attempt to account for Gettier's critique of JTB and urges that if we take knowledge to be resultant of mirroring causal chains we avoid Gettier's counterexamples against the traditional conception of knowledge, which lacks the causal link between truth and justification. This account is also a significant break from the foundationalist epistemological tradition in that Goldman eschews the traditional internalist requirement. There is a wide range of beliefs that we would intuitively call instances of knowledge, which we either no longer can or never were able to justify or give evidence in support of. Causal processes, according to Goldman's account, can provide and maintain these beliefs in a warranted fashion:

I know now, for example, that Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809. I originally came to know this fact, let us suppose, by reading an encyclopedia article. I believed that this encyclopedia was trust-worthy and that its saying Lincoln was born in 1809 must have resulted from the fact that Lincoln was indeed born in 1809. Thus, my original knowledge of this fact was founded on a warranted inference. But now I no longer remember this inference. I remember that Lincoln was born in 1809, but not that this is stated in a certain encyclopedia. I no longer have any pertinent beliefs that highly confirm the proposition that Lincoln was born in 1809. Nevertheless, I know this proposition now. My original knowledge of it was preserved until now by the causal process of memory.¹³¹

The causal process of memory is one of Goldman's "appropriate" causal process that can connect a fact in the world to a belief in a justificatory fashion. He leaves the list of justificatory processes open, and, I argue, we would be right in taking Hume's reason as one of these warranted processes the knowledge of whose function is beyond our ken but which, nonetheless, bestows justification on our beliefs. Hume's reason, unlike

¹³¹ Ibid., 370.

Goldman's memory, does not preserve justification but directly bestows it on beliefs.

Like the example of memory, however, the believer need not have any sort of privileged knowledge of how reason bestows justification in order for it to do so; it is just enough that it does.

Having shown the initial plausibility of such an account, there is another point to be made that draws it more into line with the Humean system constructed thus far. The volcano example displays a situation in which the belief that *S* comes to know is caused by the fact that is believed, i.e., that the volcano erupted centuries ago is the cause of *S*'s belief that it did. Humean beliefs in the sense in which I am interested, however, are often beliefs about what is about to occur. Causal beliefs, for Hume, may be either beliefs about the causes of some observed effect or, more often, about a future effect that will result from an observed cause. Both of these senses are what I have called beliefs in the unobserved (either unobserved causes or unobserved – because they are yet to occur – effects). Goldman accounts for these sorts of beliefs as well. His theory of knowledge does not require that *p* be the cause of *S*'s belief that *p* in every case, only that, if *p* is not the cause of *S*'s belief, “both *p* and *S*'s belief of *p* have a *common* cause.”¹³² Goldman refers to these as *Pattern 2* cases of knowledge and illustrates them in a fashion similar to *Figure 1*. *q* refers to the ancestral fact that is the cause of both *p* and *S*'s belief that *p*. In the diagram, facts are represent as lone variables in parentheses and *S*'s beliefs as *B_S(fact believed)*. *r* is an intermediary fact that causes *S*'s belief that *r*, which facilitates *S*'s reasoning to her belief that *p*. *u* and *v* simply represent background facts believed by *S*.

¹³² Ibid., 364.

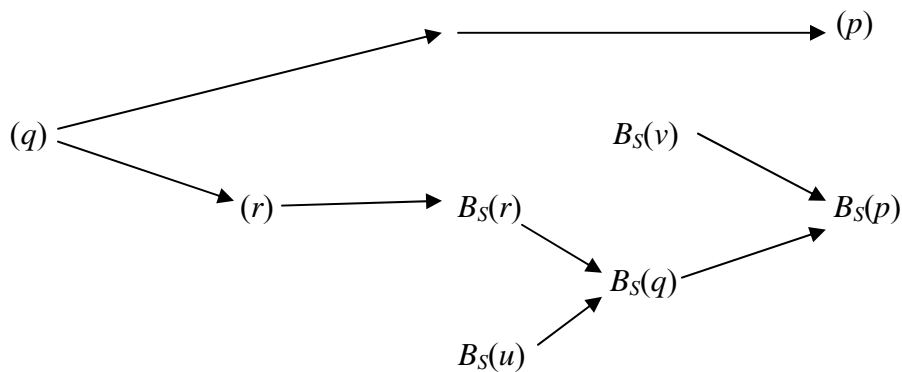


Figure 1: Goldman’s Pattern 2 Case of Knowledge¹³³

A simple example can be developed on the diagram in *Figure 1* that demonstrates this justificatory process in Humean terms. Take q to be the fact that there is a fire burning in the stove and r to be the fact heat can be felt by S . r causes S ’s belief that she feels heat from which, along with the requisite background beliefs, u , she infers that there is a fire in the stove.¹³⁴ Furthermore, S ’s belief that there is a fire along with other background beliefs, v , causes her to have the belief that the water in the pot on the stove will boil, p .

S ’s belief is justified because $B_S(p)$ has a common cause with p , namely q , i.e., S has properly reconstructed the causal chain that exists in the world. As a result of Hume’s ontological skepticism, however, S cannot know that the causal relationship between q and p holds independently of the process in *Figure 1*. This lack of independent knowledge of the causal connection would derail any attempt at justifying her belief on

¹³³ Ibid., 365.

¹³⁴ Goldman takes inferences that are part of a causal chain to be causal themselves, and also holds that causal connections can hold between various kinds of mental and physical events such as believings and events in the world. See pp. 360-1.

an internalist scheme, but on the externalist account there is no requirement that she have direct and independent knowledge of this connection. This facet of Goldman's account is of utmost importance in the analogy to Hume. Because of the ontological skepticism that Hume clearly maintains throughout his project, no direct knowledge of the essential nature of the objects or the causal forces that hold between them can be justified independent of the *Figure 1* process. Custom is that propensity that leads us to form causal beliefs, especially the belief in the uniformity principle. By careful application of that principle in our reasoning we can form justified beliefs in the above manner, though we never can know independently that the arrow from q to p really holds. This does not mean we cannot know, only that we cannot ever know that we do.

In the next section I consider a criticism leveled by Meeker against a view very similar to the CE view, which was developed by Francis Dauer. I demonstrate how the CE view easily accommodates Meeker's critique, and, using Goldman's theory as I've reconstructed it and Hume's own words, I construct a formal take on Hume's epistemology. The CE view, as I formulate it, reads two distinct levels of normativity in Hume's epistemology: an internalist rationality constraint and an externalist warrant constraint. Only when each of these is met, by Hume's lights, do we have a justified belief.

VI. A Formal Articulation of Humean Internalist - Externalist Epistemology

In “Is Hume’s Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?” Meeker levels an attack against an account advanced by Dauer that is quite similar to the above Goldman externalism reading of Hume. A careful examination of this attack affords an opportunity for further clarification and development of the CE view. Dauer argues that the sort of causal account he advances, which Meeker calls radical externalism, would be consistent with Hume’s overall epistemological project.¹³⁵ Meeker counters that radical externalism could not be consistent with the Humean account because “Hume cannot consistently maintain that epistemic justification is fully a function of factors introspectively inaccessible to the agent.”¹³⁶ Arguing for this claim, Meeker points out that it is difficult – if not impossible – to see how Hume could reconcile radical externalism with many of the epistemic norms he advances, e.g., his admonition that “[a] wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence” or the rules for reasoning laid out at *T* 1.3.15.¹³⁷ The formal account I construct in this section will answer this objection of Meeker’s by offering a bi-level epistemological account loosely inspired by the mixture of internalism and

¹³⁵ “Hume’s Skeptical Solution and the Causal Theory of Knowledge,” 369.

¹³⁶ “Is Hume’s Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?,” 132.

¹³⁷ Hume, *EHU*, 110; Meeker, “Is Hume’s Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?,” 132. Cf. *T* 1.3.15; SBN 173-5.

externalism advanced in a different context by William Alston in *Epistemic Justification*.¹³⁸

In Section IV I examined two levels of normativity in Humean epistemology. The first is the level of reasonableness or rationality, wherein one can be taken to form beliefs in ways that are or are not in accord with reason. The second level is that of the warrant of reason and answers the questions of why we should choose reason over other principles of the imagination and why we should take beliefs formed by reason as true. In this section I want to integrate these two levels into one full fledged epistemology.

Let me begin by offering a preliminary formulation of what I take Hume's account of the justification of causal beliefs to be. In claiming this as Hume's, I want to say that it's not only the case that Hume could have consistently presented such an epistemology, but that the *Treatise* and *EHU* together actually do advance it. Taking all that has been said above and concisely formulating it we get a first approximation of the CE view:

*S has a justified belief that p*¹³⁹ if and only if
1) *S's belief that p is the result of custom;*
and
2) *custom is a propensity to form a causal belief such that the reconstructed causal chain for p in S's mind mirrors the causation in the objects that led to p.*

Hume's epistemology provides an externalist account of warrant that is combined with an internalist rationality constraint. When both of these conditions are met *S's belief that p* is

¹³⁸ *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, 185-226.

¹³⁹ I write this as a formulation of justified belief and not knowledge because for Hume the present account would have amounted to correctly formed opinions or causal/probable beliefs and fall short of the certainty that he requires of knowledge. In short, it would be anachronistic to claim that Hume's account provides a definition of *knowledge* equivalent to JTB.

justified. The initial point to note is that this account preserves the consistency that worries Meeker in Dauer's account. Recognizing two distinct levels of normativity allows Hume to maintain that a just and virtuous reasoner is one who does not hold any beliefs for which she does not have sufficient evidence, while still arguing that reason itself functions to provide us with true beliefs only because of circumstances that are beyond our ken.

The *rationality constraint*, the first criteria in the formulation, says that in order for a belief to be deemed justified it must be formed rationally or reasonably, where rational or reasonable formation of a belief ensures its coincidence with the results of custom. As Hume's positive explanatory account has it, our ability to reason is the result of custom, which is defined as the propensity to form the belief that q upon experiencing an impression of p after having experienced the past constant conjunction of p and q . When custom functions reflexively, on Hume's account, any results of reason must already be justified due of the pre-established harmony between custom and causation in the objects. We come to believe things such as *when ball A strikes ball B, ball B will move* in a reflexive way, and when we do so those beliefs are justified. Not all beliefs, however, are formed in this reflexive manner. A great many of our beliefs are formed reflectively, and even those beliefs that are formed reflexively can be examined in a reflective way. Examining our reflective beliefs brings the first component of the rationality constraint to light, i.e., its role of ensuring that reason has been properly applied in the formation of those beliefs that we arrive at via reflective probable reasoning.

When one reasons reflectively, one proceeds by the interposition of intermediate ideas between what one takes to be the cause and the eventual effect or, vice versa, between what one takes to be the effect and the unseen but already occurred cause. One of the intermediate ideas employed in reflective causal reasoning must be the uniformity principle, i.e., that the future will resemble the past. Of course, as the argument of *T* 1.3.6 demonstrates, one cannot come by the uniformity principle by reflectively reasoning; it is arrived at instead purely by that principle of the imagination called custom. Having the uniformity principle in hand, however, we can go about reasoning in the customary fashion, and there are right ways and wrong ways of doing so. One might reason improperly by considering the wrong set of past experiences or by failing to notice important and efficacious differences in resembling objects. When one does so, one may come to a belief that is in fact coincidental and not causal. The point of this first component of the rationality constraint is to prevent one from coming to beliefs that are the results of reasoning improperly “Since... ‘tis possible,” Hume writes, “for all objects to become causes or effects to each other, it may be proper to fix some general rules by which we may know when they really are so.”¹⁴⁰ The eight “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” are rules for causal reasoning that show each of us how to go about reasoning in a way that best preserves the warrant that is derivative of custom. They prevent us from going off course and coming to beliefs that are out of sync with the actual causation in the objects. Reasonable beliefs are those that most closely adhere to custom.

¹⁴⁰ *T*, 1.3.15.2; SBN 173.

A second component of the rationality constraint, which Hume encounters in his discussions of prejudice and education, is that reason is only one cause of the enlivening of ideas. Since beliefs and ideas differ only in degree of liveliness, any idea that has been sufficiently enlivened might have the same effects on our reasoning and action as a properly formed belief, though the outcomes of that reasoning and action would then be tainted with irrationality and would likely be less pleasing than they might have been. As discussed in Section IV, education and prejudice are two ways that we might come to hold an enlivened idea or pseudo-belief about something or another that could not count as a justified belief. In the first paragraph of “Of scepticism with regard to reason” Hume acknowledges that though “reason must be consider’d as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect,” it must be recognized that the “interruption of other causes” may frequently interrupt reason. It is incumbent upon the reasoner, as the result of the rationality constraint, to ensure by introspection that she does not take as beliefs those ideas that have been enlivened by other causes. In order to do so, she must consider her enlivened ideas in comparison to beliefs she has reached by a careful application of reason. Whenever any enlivened idea does not match that which has been reasoned to, the rationality constraint demands that it be discarded.

Perhaps an example best serves to clarify yet another aspect of the rationality constraint, *vis* that it is not enough to have taken oneself to have achieved reasonableness, but that one must have actually done so. Suppose that Kate believes that it will rain in the next fifteen minutes. The cause of her belief is that she has observed a thunderhead cloud quickly approaching. Now suppose that Chad comes along and inquires of Kate why she

believes that it will soon be raining. Introspectively examining her process of forming that belief, Kate reconstructs the causal chain by considering all relevant past experiences of thunderheads and rain. She chooses these experiences based on their resemblance to the current experience and is careful neither to exclude any that are relevant nor include any that are superfluous. Upon this past experience and the uniformity principle, which she has come to via custom, Kate reflectively reasons that thunderheads are at least one cause of rain. Via this causal chain, from her impression of a thunderhead she comes to believe that it is about to rain. Now, Kate has had access to every step of this belief forming process (except for the origin of the uniformity principle) and, because she has reasoned like this in the past successfully, takes herself to have properly reconstructed the causal chain.¹⁴¹ She believes she has formed her belief rationally, but suppose that she has not. Perhaps Kate missed an important causal consideration, a countervailing wind or the like, and because of this her belief is incorrect.

Beyond being incorrect, Kate's belief in the above case would also be irrational even if she believes herself to have done her level best in forming it. This is an important point on the Humean system. Since custom, when unperturbed by other causes and applied to the proper set of past experiences, can produce nothing other than true beliefs – as a result of its pre-established harmony with nature – rationality is inextricably linked to truth. If one has not properly reconstructed the causal chains that have occurred in the objects and obtained a true belief, then one has not actually met the conditions of the

¹⁴¹ Goldman notes that “we cannot require someone to reconstruct every detail, since this would involve knowledge of minute physical phenomena” to which no reasoner is privy. It is enough that the most important details are considered, though it is difficult to see exactly where the line of importance should be drawn. See, Goldman (1967), p. 363n..

rationality constraint. However, one can never know with certainty whether or not one has done this, one can only do her best to follow the rules of judging causes and effects. This does not mean that rationality is in any sense external, only that humans are fallible in their belief formation and that even when we try our best we still may fail to achieve reasonable beliefs because of our epistemic shortcomings.

The second constraint in my formulation expresses the second level of normativity I discussed in Section IV and is properly understood as the externalist constraint on warrant. The warrant of reason is a result of custom's pre-established harmony with nature, though we can never know with even the smallest degree of certainty whether or not this harmony actually exists. The first constraint reconciles Hume's admonitions to stay close to the evidence when reasoning, so the externalism of the warrant constraint should give neither Meeker nor myself any worry over those passages. Instead, what concerns me in the warrant constraint is precisely the assumption of pre-established harmony that we make in taking ourselves to have justified beliefs. Section V's discussion of Goldman's causal epistemology has shown that pre-established harmony must refer to something like the mind's ability via custom to reconstruct causal chains in ideas that mirror those in the objects themselves. If this reconstruction is correct, then we do have justified beliefs. But, one must ask, on what does this mirroring hinge?

The most basic of our probable beliefs is the answer to this question. Once we have formed the belief via custom that the future will resemble the past, all other causal beliefs are possible. The fact that the future does resemble the past is precisely where pre-

established harmony must reside. The actual uniformity of nature must mirror the uniformity that we take to be existent in nature or none of our beliefs can possibly be justified. The global skeptic would argue here that since we cannot possibly know directly the nature of the objects themselves – because it is only our impressions of them with which we might become acquainted – we could never assure ourselves of the uniformity of nature and, therefore, never form any justified causal beliefs. My externalist account, however, allows for an important differentiation to be made. We may not be able to know whether or not nature is uniform, but this does not mean that if it does happen to be so our beliefs are not justified. I must agree that we cannot know whether or not our beliefs are justified – in order to do this I would need to directly know that uniformity holds among the objects – but this not knowing does not preclude them from being justified. The burden of proof is thus shifted to the skeptic, for she must prove that nature itself is not uniform in order to show that we cannot possibly have justified beliefs. And this, she must agree, is a seemingly impossible task, since nothing about the objects, including their lack of uniformity, can be directly known.¹⁴²

Now I can say that if a belief has been properly formed by appeal to past experience, custom, and the rules of just reasoning and custom and causation in nature stand in a relationship of pre-established harmony based on nature's uniformity, then that belief is justified. It seems to me that this partial externalism must be very close to Hume's epistemology, though he lacked many of the terms and recent theory to frame it

¹⁴² Dauer, "Hume's Skeptical Solution and the Causal Theory of Knowledge," 368-9.

in this way. But, before I can offer a final formulation, there is one final objection from Meeker worth considering. If it is left to stand, it might bring the whole system down.

In considering Dauer's argument, Meeker rightly points out that Goldman amends his radical externalism with an internalist constraint in a later paper.¹⁴³ Goldman recognizes that it is incoherent to argue that an agent may be justified in a belief that she does not believe herself to be justified in holding. He thus adds to his later reliabilist account that:

A further necessary condition of justifiedness... is that the believer's cognitive state, at the time he uses the method, should not *undermine* the correctness, or adequacy, of the method. Very roughly, it should not be the case that the believer *thinks* that the method is unreliable, nor is he justified in regarding the method as unreliable.¹⁴⁴

Picking up on the internalist constraint in this formulation, Meeker looks to the *reductio* argument of *T* 1.4.1 and what he calls Hume's "evidence proportionalism" to support the claim that Hume's cognizers could not come by justification in this way because, if they had properly proportioned their belief to the evidence, they would have no grounds on which to accept the uniformity principle nor any other deliverance of custom. Meeker takes Hume's argument, as I've already stated, to be an argument against the possibility of justification. In doing so, he takes him to be claiming a probability or statistics based model of belief formation and fails to understand this argument as stepping stone in Hume's overall explanatory account.¹⁴⁵

There is an interesting point to pick up from Meeker's objection. The Humean system, I think, can account for a requirement that the cognizer not disbelieve the

¹⁴³ "Is Hume's Epistemology Internalist or Externalist?," 138-9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 139; citing Goldman (1988), p. 54.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 139-40.

uniformity of nature. A belief for Hume is nothing but an enlivened idea, and he recognizes that no skeptical argument might diminish the force and liveliness of our belief in the uniformity of nature and the existence of the objects. “[N]ature,” he says, “breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding.”¹⁴⁶ The cognizer, thus, will not come to disbelieve the uniformity of nature, and, hence, will not come to believe that her own beliefs are unjustified. So long as she does not disbelieve their justification – even if she forms no positive belief about it – she will go on having justified beliefs, as she has not undermined the efficacy of custom in forming them.

There is a point here where the Humean system appears once again to be in conflict with itself, and it is a point that Hume did not pass by lightly. I’ve already explored at some length the paradox of false reason or none at all raised in *T* 1.4.7, and this is another instance of that same paradox. A seemingly trivial property of the imagination saves us from skeptical arguments by diminishing the vivacity of terribly subtle arguments, but this principle, were it made a rule, would diminish all philosophical arguments and considerably limit our possible beliefs. Hume evades this difficulty by recognizing that reason functions well only when situated in a fully sentient being that feels both physically and emotionally as it interacts with the world. The feeling of vivacity that embodies belief is yet another innate characteristic that makes reasoning possible. What can be said in defense of his escape from this paradox is only that Hume believes that we have no choice but for this principle to act when it does and fail when it

¹⁴⁶ *T*, 1.4.2.12; SBN 192.

is right for it to do so, and he says little more on the matter. The same good fortune that sets custom and the physical objects in parallel lines of causation also affects this principle of the imagination; i.e., nature has just made it so that skeptical arguments do not cause us to doubt the efficacy of reason. We today may call it a result of evolution if we take true beliefs to be an evolutionary advantage, but Hume had no such recourse.

Thus, for the final formulation, Hume turns to two distinct innate capacities. The first is custom by which we come by causal beliefs in the first place and which justifies them via its ability to reconstruct causal chains as they appear in the world. The second is that “singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy” that saves us from skeptical arguments by curbing the effectiveness of long chains of argument.¹⁴⁷ Though we “cannot establish [it] for a rule”¹⁴⁸ without forsaking all philosophy, this principle of the imagination functions serendipitously with custom to ensure that “our thoughts...[go] on in the same train as with the other works of nature.”¹⁴⁹ After all of this, I advance the following as my formal account of Hume’s epistemology:

S has a justified belief that p if and only if
1) *S’s belief that p is the result of custom;*
2) *custom is a propensity to form a causal belief such that the reconstructed causal chain for p in S’s mind mirrors the causation in the objects that led to p;*
and
3) *the liveliness of S’s belief in the uniformity of nature has not been diminished by skepticism – though S need have no positive beliefs regarding the functioning of 2.*

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.4.7.7; SBN 267.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Hume, *EHU*, 54.

VII. Concluding Remarks

The traditional reading of Hume as a global skeptic that has been carried through the last two centuries has obscured possibly rewarding encounters with his complex epistemological project in Book I of the *Treatise* and in all of *EHU*. This reading stems from approaching the negative arguments contained in *T* 1.3.6 and 1.4.1 as normative arguments rather than as arguments concerned to show that no tenable explanation of the basic functioning of reason had yet been given. Approaching Hume with an eye toward his explanatory project has allowed these arguments to be recast and has reopened the possibility for productive exploration of his epistemological account.

Hume is not the global skeptic that the traditional reading has made him out to be but is, in fact, quite moderated in his skepticism. His theory of ideas entails an ontological skepticism and his understanding of the fallibility of human thought entails a skepticism about knowledge-as-certainty, but once he has made this clear, he goes on to offer an account of probable reasoning that demonstrates the possibility of humans being justified in assenting to many probable beliefs as true. Considering knowledge in its contemporary construal as justified true belief, it is, *contra* Meeker, unquestionable that Hume would have taken humans to be capable of knowledge, and it seems quite probable that he would have taken us to actually have such knowledge. What is not possible on his

account, however, is that we could ever know that our beliefs definitely count as such knowledge.

In this respect, Hume's epistemology closely resembles the contemporary, externalist causal epistemology of Alvin Goldman, and I have based my reconstruction of Hume's account on this work. The warrant of reason, by Hume's lights, is the result of the serendipitous relationship – what he calls “pre-established harmony” – between the causation in the objects that ensures the uniformity of nature and the reconstruction of causal chains in the human mind that is the result of custom acting in the imagination.

This externalist account of warrant is paired with a set of epistemic norms that function as an internalist constraint on rationality. These norms serve to guide the reasoner to apply probable reasoning in a fashion that forms beliefs most closely in accord with custom. Only when rationality and warrant are paired together in the formation of a belief is that belief taken to be justified.

This reading of Hume, which draws out connections between his work and an epistemological theory that would not gain proper attention for another 200 years, opens the door to many more fruitful interactions with his epistemology. What cues can contemporary epistemologists take from Hume's work? Can understanding him in this light offer new insights into the vexing problems of theories of causal epistemology or of naturalistic epistemology more broadly? Can this understanding of Hume help to uncover new questions in the history of early modern philosophy? I cannot answer these questions, but time and further interaction with the Humean project along these lines may

well shed new light on a number of quite contemporary concerns where his theory was thought before to be utterly silent.

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