

PAUL RUSSELL AND THE PRE-EMINENCE OF IRRELIGION IN HUME

Peter Fosl
University
Email: pfosl@icloud.com

Recasting Hume and Early Modern Philosophy, Oxford University Press's 2021 collection of sixteen essays on early modern philosophy by University of British Columbia and University of Lund Professor Paul Russell – what Russell himself calls a “retrospective” (xiii) – complements his two research monographs: *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's way of Naturalizing Moral Responsibility* (OUP 1995) and *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (OUP 2010).¹ The former aims at crafting an account of moral responsibility that is distinctively naturalistic in its compatibilism.

Two essays in *Recasting* are drawn from chapters in *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, and, in general, the essays composing Part II of *Recasting* touch upon the topics addressed by that earlier volume. The two essays reprised from *Freedom and Moral Sentiment* in *Recasting* are: “Hume's ‘Two Definitions’ of Cause and the Ontology of ‘Double Existence’” (originally in *Hume Studies* 1984) and “Hume on Responsibility and Punishment” (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 1990). The other essays collected in the five Parts of *Recasting* were originally scattered across various journals and edited volumes published by prominent Anglo-American presses, most rooted in the Oxbridge traditions.

Russell distances this collection a bit from *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, writing about the two essays appearing as chapters there, that “it is crucial that both of these essays be unshackled from the framework of *Freedom and Moral Sentiment* and considered independently...” (xix). Part II contains those essays and addresses “Free Will and Moral Luck.” A naturalistic theory of responsibility detaches it from issues of voluntariness and free will, so crucial to religious and metaphysical debates. That's the framework into which Russell has placed the earlier, now “unshackled” essays here. Part III, the shortest, composed of only two essays, is about the adjacent topics of “Ethics, Virtue, and Optimism.”

The substantial essays relevant to skepticism mostly appear in Parts I and IV. Many prominent Hume commentators have made a lasting impact by boring into a defining interpretive thesis. Norman Kemp Smith established a naturalistic reading that runs contrary to the nihilistic skeptical and atheistic readings that preceded it. The Kemp Smith line has endured through the scholarship of much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, up through and past Don Garrett's magisterial 2014 volume, *Hume* (Routledge). Ken Winkler is associated with the

¹ References to *Recasting* thence will be intra-textual and in parentheses. One of my own first publications was a review of Russell's first monograph in *Eighteenth-Century Scotland: Book Review Supplement* (Spring 1996): 8.

“New Hume” debate about the reality of causal power. Don Livingston’s reputation is anchored in his “common life” reading of Hume. John P. Wright develops the skeptical realism thesis, deeply rooted in his reading of early modern science. Donald Ainslie argues that Hume has discovered that the self-reflection that leads to skepticism is ultimately pathological. Graciela de Pierris follows a formidable line of what Jan Hakkarainen calls “two Hume” theorists, who read Hume as a metaphysical skeptic but also as an empirical naturalist-realist pursuing a naturalistic moral theory and a constrained, experimental natural “science of man.”

Paul Russell has staked his reputation upon reading Hume, like so many of Hume’s contemporaries and nineteenth-century interpreters, as a fundamentally “irreligious” thinker. Russell’s interpretation, however, surpasses other irreligious accounts in its capacious scope, addressing the Hume’s texts comprehensively. Russell positions his interpretive framework as a distinct but not retrograde alternative to the skeptical-natural-scientist-moralist reading that has dominated the field. Accordingly, Russell announces in the Introduction to *Recasting* that: “The unifying thread, running through most if not all of these essays, concerns the relevance of Hume’s *irreligious* motivations and objectives to his philosophy” (xiv).

Part IV of *Recasting* bores, most directly, into that topic in a cluster called, “Skepticism, Religion, and Atheism.” Part I complements those specifically pointed publications with more general essays on “Metaphysics and Epistemology.” Articulating his revisionist coherence agenda in Part V, Russell closes the volume with a section on “Irreligion and the Unity of Hume’s Thought.” The last essay, “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion and the Idea of British Empiricism” is especially synoptic.

My own work has been devoted to reading Hume as a radical and comprehensive skeptic, whose thought blends elements of both Academic and Pyrrhonian philosophy. Hume’s irreligion, by those lights, is a dimension of his skeptical project, not the other way around. Because my interests orbit around Hume’s skepticism, and because this journal does as well, my commentary here will focus upon the relationship between skepticism and irreligion that Russell maps out and why I think a shift in the center of hermeneutic gravity towards skepticism warranted and preferable.

The first section of Russell’s “retrospective,” about “Metaphysics and Epistemology,” labors to show how Hume’s work on those topics supports his irreligious topics. The opening essay is among the earliest and, for many today, still the most provocative of the collection. It connects two topics central to understanding Hume’s skepticism: the external world and causation. Russell’s reprised 1984 essay finds Hume embracing double existence theory (the view that perceptions of the external world are different from the external world itself) as part of his skepticism, especially his skeptical analysis of causation: “In short, the ontology of double existence permits Hume to embrace a position which is consistent with his ‘mitigated scepticism’” (14). Regarding Hume’s two definitions of cause, “the dualism which we find in Hume’s account of causation simply reflects the dualism of the ontology of double existence” (26). The veil of perception is, according to Russell epistemically penetrable, but only in a limited, mitigated way. The double existence model establishes skeptical grounds for limiting inquiry to the experiences of common life; and the epistemic critique of causation undermines cosmological proofs for the existence of God, most notably Samuel Clarke’s.

Curiously, Russell later, in *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise*, retreats from the double-existence conclusion towards a reading of Hume more in line with the “vulgar.” *Riddle* presents a Hume who ultimately returns to the pre-philosophical and common understanding of the world, according to which there is no difference

between what-we-perceive and what-is, and where human experience apprehends independent objects directly as they are.² That is, Russell argues in *Riddle* that while double existence is “the most philosophical reflections can do,” the “vulgar” position on perception nevertheless remains for critical philosophers “inescapable.”³ Donald W. Livingston, Stephanie Rocknak, and Donald C. Ainslie, have each in their own fashion cultivated a vulgarian reading of Hume on the external world.⁴

Russell, in line with these vulgarian interpreters, concludes in *Riddle* that both for (a) the vulgar and even for (b) philosophers who understand that the vulgar view cannot defeat the skeptical critique of perception: “vulgar belief in body ... is our normal and natural condition.”⁵ It is, one might say, the human fate. In what follows, I wish to argue that these vulgarian readings of Hume’s “true philosophy,” however, miss the more positive and richer account of what, for Hume, is a true skeptical understanding of the real, one that extends the dialectical process of improvement begun by the “wise,” and even by “false philosophers.”

While Russell’s 2010 revision is consonant with what has become the dominant view these days of the “double existence” theory of perception articulated at T 1.4.2, Russell’s earlier embrace of double existence follows many of the most important Hume commentators of the twentieth century.⁶ John Passmore, like Antony Flew, for example, finds in Hume a double existence position that emerges as a hybrid, reconciling the clashing claims of reason and imagination: “If we ask what Hume believed, what he committed himself to in his scientific work” – assuming he did engage in scientific work – “the answer is that he believed in the existence both of material objects and of perceptions, and thought that perceptions were ‘appearances of’ material objects.”⁷ Furthermore, Passmore, before Russell, connects double-existence theory to Hume’s skepticism: “The distinction between ideas and things was one which did not fully satisfy either Reason or Instinct; yet Hume continues to believe that philosophy is committed to it. The outcome of such uncertainties is inevitably sceptical.”⁸ Neither Russell nor Passmore, however, appreciate just how skeptical.

John Bricke reads Hume as a double existence theorist, too, but as one less affected by the skeptical implications of that theory and therefore fully committed to epistemically disclosive representationalism.⁹ John P. Wright, well known for

² Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179–80.

³ Russell, *Riddle* (2010), 181.

⁴ Stefanie Rocknak first acknowledges and then mistakenly collapses the distinction between true and false philosophers by not understanding that Hume’s skeptical true philosophy relinquishes all claims to “positive epistemic evaluation”; Rocknak (2015), 240. She also confounds the distinction between Hume’s true philosophy and the vulgar point of view by simply characterizing true philosophy as “a reflective return to the unreflective vulgar perspective, or the ‘common’ ‘way of thinking.’” Rocknak (2015), 230; see in general her Chapter 11, section 2.2, provocatively titled, “Vulgar Philosophy v. False Philosophy v. True Philosophy.” Livingston rejects a positive double existence theory in favor of Hume’s simply returning to vulgar “common life” in his *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (1984), 276ff.: “a main point of book I [of the *Treatise*] is to show that philosophers *think* as well as talk with the vulgar” (276). Livingston reads double existence theory as a “relic of Cartesianism” (275) and connects it to what he calls radical, revolutionary Cartesianism in politics (277ff.).

⁵ Russell, *Riddle* (2010), 180.

⁶ Thence ‘T’ refers to Hume’s 1739 and 1740 *A Treatise of Human Nature*; ‘E’ refers to Hume’s First Enquiry, the 1748 *Enquiry* concerning human understanding; ‘ES’ refers to Hume’s *Essays*. See the bibliography for specific editions.

⁷ John A. Passmore, *Hume’s Intentions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 90; see 89-91, 142. See Antony Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief: A Study of His First Inquiry* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), 255.

⁸ Passmore, *Hume’s Intentions* (1952), 142.

⁹ John Bricke, *Hume’s Philosophy of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22–24.

his “skeptical realism” about causal power, argues for an epistemically capable double-existence reading.¹⁰ Writes Wright, if you’ll pardon the pun: Hume “quite justifiably continued to assume the truth of the philosophical theory [of double existence], even after he produced arguments to show that it was impossible to verify it directly, and that it arose only from the discovery of the falsity of the ordinary man’s belief in the independent existence of the direct objects of perception” (Wright, 1983; 59; see also 52, 87, and 89).

To understand, however, the full skeptical import of double existence, how it figures into Hume’s true skeptical philosophy, it’s important to start with ordinary belief. In Humean philosophy, the idea of external reality, as it is experienced in common life, does not originate in perceptions themselves – that is, in any marks or indicators they carry or anything about perceptions that might serve as a criterion of epistemically capable apprehension. That goes for all impressions, as they impress humans with the force and vivacity of belief: “tis neither upon account of the involuntariness of certain impressions, as is commonly suppos’d, nor of their superior force and violence, that we attribute to them a reality, and continu’d existence, which we refuse to others, that are voluntary or feeble” (T 1.4.2.16). Vulgar, ordinary, or common life reality (CLR hence) is a *system*, a system not only of present perception but also of memory and anticipatory imagination. Once critical reflection turns its gaze upon this system, however, it finds CLR wanting. In response to that critique and, in addition, the irrepressible and persistent imperatives of feeling and imagination, the philosophical mind crafts double existence theory. When critical reflection scrutinizes double existence theory, problems connected to the skeptical crisis of T 1.4.7 emerge.

While Donald C. Ainslie is certainly right that Hume’s Introductory remarks in the *Treatise* presage the stormy seas into which critical reflection will sail in T 1.4, it is important to notice that Hume’s doubts in those closing sections engage much more than philosophical self-reflection itself. Skeptical doubts also become entangled, for example, with the epistemic project of knowing the external world and with it “the effects of one body upon another” in natural science. Cicero recognizes the broad scope of that same self-reflexive problem in with self-reflective anatomies of human epistemics, reaching deeply skeptical, not (*pace* Ainslie) anti-self-reflective and realist ends in the *Academica* (ACD).¹¹

Russell appeals to the *Letter from a Gentleman*, to connect Hume’s investigations in double existence to skepticism and irreligion more broadly understood (5). Understanding the breadth of Humean skepticism understanding the skeptical import of enduring double existence theory, one can see that Hume neither retreats from skepticism nor, as Ainslie would have it, limits it to the question of whether the epistemic grounds for otherwise epistemically capable science can be secured. Hume not only acknowledges the groundlessness of the sciences whose foundations he had initially aspired to establish in the Introduction to the *Treatise*; he also suspends judgment on the sciences’ epistemic capabilities. For all that, however – and this is the crucial bit – he does not abandon the sciences. Like the skeptically influenced French academics (e.g., Foucher, Mersenne, Gassendi, and their fellow traveler Hobbes), though more radically than them, Hume re-conceives the sciences in skeptical, non-epistemic ways. Academic

¹⁰ John P. Wright, *The Skeptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹¹ Cicero writes that “it is possible that [the organs of the body] are changed by the process of dissection and uncovering [i.e., self-reflection]” (ACD 2.39.122). About Hume as an anatomist of the mind, cf. T 3.3.6.6; E 1.8.

philosophers who developed the *eulogon* and *pithanon* recognize that same alternative

True Skeptical Realism: Methodizing and Correcting the Imaginary Real.

Hume is cagey about the way true skeptical philosophy engages the real, and his exposition makes it easier to say what a “true skeptical real” is not than what it is. That may be part of Hume’s point, as Graciela De Pierris suggests in her canny description of the correlative three kinds of thinker Hume distinguishes earlier in the *Treatise* at T 1.3.12.5—namely, the “vulgar,” the “wise” (ironically characterized so), and the “skeptic.” She writes:

Here Hume – in his guise as a lover of skeptical paradox – shows us that, whereas the reflective reasonings of the wise man or the scientist improve and correct the unreflective inferences of the vulgar, the third character of the skeptic stands outside of this process of improvement. He observes a meta-perspective, as it were and notes that neither the unreflective inferences of the vulgar nor the reflective reasoning of the wise man are ultimately justified.¹²

For De Pierris, the labor of the true skeptic here is largely negative and critical, but also limited. The skeptic understands the groundlessness of the sciences but does not for that reason challenge their epistemic claims. There is, again, however, much more to Hume’s skeptical critiques about putative knowledge of the world than this appreciation of inquiry’s lack of foundations.

Purging Perceptions of Epistemic Import

How does Hume indicate positively that double existence theory can be revised as a true skeptical system of the real? In the first place, the very form of double-existence theory’s generation exemplifies the characteristically Pyrrhonian practice of inducing suspension through equipollence (*isosthenia*) – in its case, a sort of equipollence between the demands of reason and imagination (PH 1.22.196, ACD 1.12.45). That this strategy is self-conscious in Hume is evident in the frequency with which he uses it. One can see it, for example, not only when Hume famously describes the way the mind “reconciles the contradiction” between reason and imagination concerning perception at T 1.4.2.20, but also in his figuring the clash between passion and imagination at T 2.2.2.26 as a matter of “counter-balance” and a “complying” compromise. Alive to this strategy, Louis Loeb, like Johnsen, has pursued a stability reading of Hume’s epistemic thought.¹³

But logical contradictories and contraries cannot be reconciled logically, even through counter-balancing *isosthenia*; nor can they comply with one another. Hume says as much: “The supposition of the continu’d existence of sensible objects or perceptions” is a reconciliation that “involves no contradiction” (T 1.4.2.40) and no overcoming of logical contradiction. Although Hegel and Wade Robison each find

¹² De Pierris, *Ideas and Evidence* (2015), 262. Bredo Johnsen develops a similar line, complementing it with a “reflective equilibrium” model of Humean justification within the sciences; Johnsen, *Righting Epistemology* (2017), xi.

¹³ Loeb writes: “In the course of the *Treatise*, Hume specifies particular mechanisms as ones that infix belief...”; Loeb (2010), 149; reprint of Loeb (2001). Loeb does not see the roots of Hume’s strategy in Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism, but he does understand the skeptical point Hume makes when he observes that the stability that emerges through reflection “does not,” for Hume, “require any argument that reflection is epistemically privileged”; Loeb (2005), 97, cf. 93 and 87ff.

in Hume an insuperable irrationalism with regard to perception, I follow Peter Kail in arguing that, for Hume, double existence is logically coherent.¹⁴

Hume is able to sustain this coherent equipollence by deflating the contrariety that false philosophy's dogmatic conception of double existence perpetuates through his enlisting several Pyrrhonian devices. First, Hume both appeals to the Pyrrhonian trope of *diaphonia* (PH 1.15.164) and practices Pyrrhonian openness or *zetesis* (PH 1.3.7) when he allows, in a tragically under-scrutinized passage, a revision of his earlier scruples. Doing so, Hume entertains the curious possibility, a possibility rarely acknowledged by commentators, that for Hume perceptions and their qualities "may exist separately" from any particular mind "and have no need of any thing else to support their existence" (T 1.4.5.5).¹⁵ A bit later, Hume also finds that, "taking it for *something, that can exist by itself*, 'tis evident every perception is a substance, and every distinct part of a perception a distinct substance" (T 1.4.5.24). It is an alternative theory Hume may have encountered in a less radical form in Berkeley.¹⁶

Double-existence theory nevertheless rises to a position of prominence among possible alternative theories, perhaps because it allows us reflective inquirers to "set ourselves at ease *as much as possible* by successively granting to each [imagination and reason] whatever it demands" (T 1.4.2.52; *emph. mine*). This philosophical ease is not poorly read as skeptical *ataraxia*. As Louis Loeb observes: "Hume's conclusion is that if tranquility is to be achieved, it will have to be within a system of beliefs," here a system of the real.¹⁷ That means that although the double existence system is, in Russell's characterization, a "palliative" (14); it is not for that reason false.

Hume, in fact, offers a clear signal that he does not drop the double existence system, even after criticizing the way "false philosophers" speciously invest it with metaphysical and epistemic import. He signals that acceptance not only in this

¹⁴ Hegel finds in double existence and other endemic contrarities a particular shortcoming in Hume: "In itself reason [for Hume] thus has no criterion whereby the antagonism between individual desires, and between itself and the desires, may be settled. Thus, everything appears in the form of an irrational existence devoid of thought..."; Hegel (1896), 3:375. Manfred Kuehn (1983), 26, writes that "there is in Hume a fundamental class of contradictions which he believed were neither accidental nor created by his analysis, but were essential characteristics of the human mind." Robison (1973), 98-99, writes: "Hume's point ... is that the essential features of the human mind are such that the very conditions that make us suppose the existence of external objects make us unreasonable. ... Hume means to show that the constitution of the human mind is such that we cannot be reasonable..." (98). P. J. E. Kail in contrast argues correctly that for Hume the claim that external objects resemble perceptions, even if they may not be perceptions, is coherent; Kail (2007), 60-61: "The supposition of objects resembling perceptions therefore seems coherent" (61).

¹⁵ Laing (1932), 152-53, notices, too that Hume allows for the possibility that perceptions may continue to exist outside the given bundle of the mind. See Fosl, *Hume's Scepticism* (2020), Chapter Seven, §7.3.2.1.

¹⁶ Berkeley may have held just the related metaphysical position that ideas (if not exactly perceptions) may exist separately from individual minds. While many commentators have argued that for Berkeley ideas are strictly subjective and exist only when perceived by an individual mind, Luce (1963) and others, including recently P. J. E. Kail (2014b), 62-69, argue that Berkeley's claim that perceptions are (a) mind-dependent does not necessarily entail that they are (b) identical with any *individual* acts of perception. It is therefore at least logically possible that perceptions are objective in the sense that they can continue to exist independently of a specific particular mind—so long as some other mind perceives them. Berkeley's later dialogue between Hylas (the materialist) and Philonous (the philosopher) suggests as much: "*Hyl*: Supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive it possible, that things perceivable by sense may still exist? *Phil*: I can; but then it must be in another mind..." Berkeley (1713), 64. Berkeley writes elsewhere in the *Dialogues* that: "the colors are really in the tulip which I see, is manifest. Neither can it be denied, that the tulip may exist independent of your mind or mine; but that any immediate object of the senses, that is, any idea, or combination of ideas, should exist in an unthinking substance, or exterior to all minds, is in itself an evident contradiction"; Berkeley (1713), 31; quoted by Frankel (2013), 482.

¹⁷ Loeb (2010), 137; a reprint of Loeb (1998).

remark about maximal “possible” ease but also when he writes that having established the difference between perceptions and external objects, he “shall” continue to “do [so] for the future” (T 1.4.2.26). In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*, he does just that. That, again, is not to say that Hume concludes that double existence is true, just that it is easy and useful, and therefore preferable. His reasoning follows the kind of assent proper to the Academic *pithanon*, rather than a dogmatic assertion of epistemic apprehension of the real or a claim to have expressed being in words and thinking. Stephen Buckle and John Wright also make an explicit connection between Humean philosophy and the Academic “plausible” criterion.¹⁸

The radical inversion of Hume’s imagined, not known, world

Besides the acknowledgement of diaphonic possibilities for perception, Hume both (a) defuses the contrariety between the claims of reason and imagination and also (b) undermines the primary quality realism of false philosophers’ double existence theories by developing a skeptical theory of external objects. Hume, that is to say, does not after his skeptical crisis persist in making the distinction between objects and perceptions in the same way that false philosophers make it. Unlike false philosophers, the Humean true skeptic will not follow false philosophers in projecting doubled existences as objects that are specifically and metaphysically different from perceptions but purportedly nevertheless epistemically apprehensible. For the true skeptic, external objects are understood as imaginative projections of nothing more than what can be culled from impressions of sensation—those objects are just imaginatively doubled appearances. Because *imagining is not knowing*, it follows that Hume’s position has relinquished epistemic access to independent, metaphysically real objects, even while sustaining a preference for double existence as a stabilizing theory.

While Hume may sometimes write about perceptions as “copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent” (e.g., E 12.1.9), in those contexts we should better interpret him to mean existences that we *imagine* to be uniform and independent. Hume is elsewhere unambiguous that, contrary to the errors of false philosophers, the senses cannot “produce the opinion of a distinct [i.e., independent] existence, because *they neither can offer it to the mind as represented, nor as original*” (T 1.4.2.11; *emph. mine*).¹⁹ Contrary to Thomas Reid and other realists, perceptions *do not actually* present objects themselves immediately – i.e., “originally” – to us; nor do they present objects *as representations* of a metaphysical real. More importantly for our purposes here, perceptions *cannot possibly* present objects as either represented or as original. As we saw in analyzing the CLR, perceptions can present only themselves, and in themselves perceptions represent nothing beyond themselves. The yawning gap between perceptions and a world beyond them for the Humean skeptic persists.

¹⁸ Stephen Buckle, *Hume’s Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 117; Wright, “Hume’s Academic Scepticism,” 407–35.

¹⁹ T 1.1.1.4: “I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?” Cf. T 1.2.1.3 and T 1.2.1.5. Indeed, in many instances, Hume writes about ideas representing impressions, but representing perceptual experiences is different from representing anything beyond perception, e.g.: “we shall here content ourselves with establishing one general proposition, *That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (T 1.1.1.7).

Hume's account presents a deep inversion of much of the philosophical tradition preceding him. While for false philosophers and other dogmatists, from at least Plato onward, *perceptions are copies of objects*, for the Humean true-skeptical science of man, *objects are copies of perceptions*. The Humean skeptic does, of course, allow the possibility that external objects actually do resemble and represent appearances.²⁰ But the true skeptic does not claim to *know* this. Hume writes that “we shou'd never have any *reason* to infer, that our objects resemble our perceptions” (T1.4.2.54; *emph. mine*); but he allows that true skeptics *imagine* or *suppose* that they do. The true philosopher accepts that we fatefully imagine a “harmony” between thought and reality (E 5.21), all the while acknowledging our perceptual separateness from the imagined external real.

Hume does use of the term “representation” at E 12.1.9, but not in a way that bears epistemic import or makes metaphysical claims.²¹ Hume makes it clear at T 1.2.3.11 that what representation is available to ideas is just the representation of impressions (i.e. other perceptions), not of an independent metaphysical reality: “Ideas always represent the *objects or impressions*,” meaning objects qua impressions, “from which they are deriv'd, and can never without a *fiction* represent or be apply'd to any other” (cf. T 1.3.7.5; *emph. mine*).

Silence rather than apprehension.

Hume's anticipation of the skeptical refusal of epistemic representation at T 1.4.2.11 and his proposal for a science limited to appearances alone is also textually evident in the way he prepares the reader at T 1.3.5.2, long before skeptical crisis at T 1.4.7, for the later double-existence discussion of T 1.4.2 by offering a vaccination against epistemological and metaphysical realism. As a matter of prophylaxis, Hume presents a diverse series of alternative explanations for perception that balance against one another and that establish another tactical *diaphonia*:

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. (T 1.3.5.2)

The Humean representation of apparent nature never pretends to be a representation that grounds knowledge of reality beyond immediate perception. In this, Hume anticipates Kant.²² As James Harris puts it: “Hume's scepticism is

²⁰ Hume allows that perceptions may be either “true or false,” that they may either “represent nature justly, or be mere illusions” (T 1.3.5.2). Just representation is not ruled out as nonsensical or necessarily impossible; see Kail (2003), 52.

²¹ At T 1.3.5.3–4 Hume makes clear that there is no way to justify an epistemic distinction between memory and imagination. All that distinguishes them is “a different feeling,” one of their components (PH 1.11.23) Pyrrhonians accept as guides to a non-dogmatic practice in “accordance with appearances” (PH 1.8.17).

²² Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761–1833), whose book *Aenesidemus* (1792) Hegel engages in his 1802 essay, *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy*, not only criticizes Kant for violating skeptical limits but also articulates a critique of claims to epistemic apprehension of the external world similar to Hume's. While Schulze criticizes Kant's violations of skeptical limits elsewhere and in other ways, Schulze's particular critique of epistemic claims to knowledge of the world centers on Kant's account of causation, though it is also similar to Hume's skeptical arguments based upon the impossibility of humans apprehending the causes of perceptions. Schulze writes: “As determined by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the function of the principle of causality thus undercuts all philosophizing about the where or how of the origin of our cognitions. All assertions on the matter, and every conclusion drawn from them, become empty subtleties, for once we accept that determination of the principle as our rule of thought, we could never ask, ‘Does anything actually exist which is the ground and cause of our representations?’ We can only ask, ‘How must the

thorough-going enough ... to issue in *complete* suspension of judgement as regards whether there is more to the universe, causally speaking” than regular conjunctions of perceptions, and indeed, appearances generally.²³

Nearly ten years later and after his dispiriting failure in 1745 to ascend to John Pringle’s chair in moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh because of his skepticism and atheism, Hume remains unequivocal in the 1748 first *Enquiry* that his suspensive, limiting, and constraining view at T 1.3.5.2 remains unchanged. In fact, he adds to the *epochê* registered in the *Treatise* an indication of his skeptical *aphasia* (PH 1.7.13):

By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them (if that be possible) and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us? ... It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: How shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely *silent*. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The *supposition* of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning. (E 12.11–12; emphasis mine)

This Pyrrhonian silence is significant, and it marks Hume keeping an aphasic “silence” about the ultimate grounds as well as the epistemic capacities of perception.²⁴ Hume maintains a similar epistemic silence about the existence of God.

Imagined rather than apprehended causes of perception

The mention of “supposition” at E 12.11–12 is characteristic and consistently skeptical, too. Hume writes at E 12.11 (emph. mine) only that there is no “*argument* by which it can be *proved*” that the perceptions of the mind are “caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them.” While that origin and causal relation can’t be proven, it can be imagined. We simply cannot *know* whether it is the case. At T 1.4.2.47, Hume similarly argues and does not argue:

But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. ’Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence or any of the qualities of the former, we can ever form any *conclusion* concerning the existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our *reason* in this particular. (emph. mine)

Reason on its own and in its aspiration to epistemic and metaphysical ultimacy remains unsatisfied, but Hume does not exclude satisfactions of another sort,

understanding join these representations together, in keeping with the pre-determined functions of its activity, in order to gather them as one experience?”; *apud* Giovanni and Harris (2000), 131, citing Schulze (1792), 176–77. In 1794 Fichte published a review of Schulze’s book; see Breazeale (1981). Dan Breazeale calls Schulze a “spokesman for ‘Humean skepticism’”; Fichte (1994), 67n34.

²³ Emphasis mine; Harris (2005), 85–86; quoted by Kail (2007c), 260.

²⁴ A. H. Basson (Cavendish, 1958), 133, 140ff., and 172, also reads Hume as Pyrrhonian along these lines.

perhaps the kind to which he alludes at T 1.4.7.14.²⁵ Hume writes “*this philosophical hypothesis* [i.e., double existence] *has no primary recommendation, either to reason or to the imagination*” (T 1.4.2.47, SBN 212; *emph. Hume’s*). It does, however, bear a secondary recommendation, a secondary satisfaction as a non-dogmatic skeptical hybrid.

While reason itself must be silent about whether perceptions resemble the world, imagination, since it is not epistemic, need not be. Just as it is for what Don Garrett has called Hume’s “Title Principle,” where stable and accepted ideas and beliefs are generated by the methodizing mixture of reason and some propensity (T 1.4.7.11), so we find in the imagination and its monstrous hybrid with reason a source, if not a foundation, for an abiding understanding of the external world.

So upon the whole our *reason* neither does, nor is it possible it ever should, upon any supposition, give us an assurance of the continu’d and distinct existence of body. That opinion must be entirely owing to the IMAGINATION: which must now be the subject of our enquiry.”²⁶

Imagination mixed non-dogmatically with reason in a revised double existence theory offers both assurance and reflective stability.

Sextus writes that skeptics accept that “honey seems” sweet (PH 1.14.101), and Hume agrees; but the true skeptic’s acceptance of that appearance is different from both that of the vulgar (who make no distinction between the apparently and the really sweet) and from that of false philosophers (who think they have apprehended the real, metaphysical nature of sweetness behind or grounding appearances). The vulgar live a kind of naive “illusion,” unaware of the epistemic limits revealed by skeptical philosophy. False philosophers vainly attempt to remedy that illusion and answer reason’s desires with metaphysical posits and with claims to epistemic apprehension. True skeptical philosophers accept – in contrast to both the vulgar and to false philosophers – an imaginative projection consistent with a skeptical *epochê* and *aphasia*. Modern philosophers write and think in “false,” “mistaken,” incoherent, and dogmatical ways. Skeptical true philosophers practice a kind of coherent, though monstrous fiction in the projected universe we paint through our imaginations (T 1.3.9.3-4; T 1.3.10.8; E 5.2.12).

Skepticism and Irreligion

Of course, the relationship between irreligion and skepticism is the pivot upon which my disagreements, as well as agreements, turn with Russell’s work. The issue is difficult to sort, because skepticism is so deeply bound up with irreligion in Hume. Is skepticism an instrument of Hume’s centrally irreligious project, or is irreligion an aspect of Hume’s skepticism? Is Hume a skeptical atheist or an irreligious skeptic. I argue for the latter, while Russell argues for the former. Section IV of *Recasting* is positioned as the climax of the book. The essays there articulate the heart of Russell’s position. I will, therefore, bore into those texts.

²⁵ Hume writes there (*emphasis mine*): ‘But were these hypotheses [i.e., those of specious false philosophy] once remov’d, we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be *satisfactory* to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination.’ It may be too much to hope for the determination of whether a system of opinions is true or false, but that system may still be *satisfactory* to the mind and endure critical examination.

²⁶ T 1.4.2.14, *emph. Hume*; quoted by Rocknak (2013), 111 and 111n7, where she signals her understanding that for Hume the continued existence of objects is “imagined.”

Chapter 12, “Hume’s Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism,” explains how Russell reads irreligion as consistent with Hume’s skepticism. Russell is at pains there to show why Hume should be understood to take the “hard” position of a “skeptical atheist,” a skeptic who nevertheless advances the metaphysical position that God does not exist, rather than merely suspending judgment on it (a position Russell reads as “soft” atheism). Russell writes that “Hume’s position is not simply one of suspension of belief or mere doubt—he is committed to denying any such hypothesis as unreasonable and running contrary to our experience. It is also argued that Hume’s (mitigated) skeptical principles are not, in practice, inconsistent with his atheism” (xviii). Russell’s general argument runs roughly like this:

1. Hume is a mitigated skeptic, where that means accepting the largely probabilistic and generally defeasible epistemic capacity of philosophical and scientific inquiry, so long as it is limited to common life.
2. Hume accepts that the findings of well conducted inquiries pursued within common life nevertheless bear implications about what lies beyond it.
3. Those findings warrant for Hume more than skeptical suspension; they also warrant hard atheism about the existence of God, where God is understood to be an immaterial, intelligent being that is the cause of the world. In particular:
 - a. Because of the magnitude of evil in the world, a benevolent God cannot exist.
 - b. Because the human mind can bear no resemblance to the divine mind, God cannot have thoughts, passions, and sentiments like humans; we cannot, therefore, infer a God on the basis of our minds (320).
 - c. The “one key argument” (321) Hume advances: because mind is not in common life be understood to be separable from the body, the idea of not only an immaterial and immortal soul but also of an immaterial creator makes no sense.
 - d. Because matter is visible, because mind cannot be separated from body, and because God is taken to be an immaterial mind of some kind, God cannot exist (322).
 - e. Hume’s presentation of alternative theories about the generation of the universe amount, in Hume’s context, to Spinozistic or “Stratonic” atheism (323).
 - f. Because ultimately mysticism becomes indistinguishable from atheism, mysticism offers no justification for God’s existence.
4. Therefore, Hume is well read as a hard skeptical atheist.

My own, contrasting view might be formulated this way:

1. Hume is a deeply Pyrrhonian, as well as Academic skeptic, from which it follows that epistemic projects are suspended *in toto*, both in philosophical/scientific inquiry, as well as in common life. Hume is an Academic non-realist skeptic whose use of reason and experimental method are to be understood on the model of the Clitomachian *pithanon*.
2. Hume does not accept that the findings of inquiries pursued within common life are grounds for making claim to metaphysical knowledge about what lies beyond it.

3. Hume suspends epistemic and metaphysical judgments about God; but he is inclined to irreligious hypothesis for moral and political reasons, as well as for the sake of skeptical *isosthenia* or balancing dogmatisms.

Let's look at Russell's arguments.

About Hume's Academic skepticism: Russell asserts, without much argument, that there "is no reason to suppose that either the theist or the atheist must be a dogmatist and so any simple contrast between skepticism, on one side, and theism or atheism, on the other, should not be based on an assumption of this kind" (308). One might think that "atheism" and "theism" are, by definition, dogmatic, because they both advance metaphysical and theological claims. Russell appeals, however, to skeptical fideism to illustrate his point. Fideists believe that God exists, but they do so on the basis of faith, not reason, which is another way of saying that they hold beliefs while consciously understanding that they cannot justify them as knowledge. Fideists believe that *p* without claiming to know that *p*. A radical skepticism, contrary to Russell, is not consistent with hard atheism.

For Russell, drawing exclusively on *Enquiry* 12 and the *Dialogues*, a more radical – i.e., Pyrrhonian – skeptic would not hold beliefs at all (308). This reading seems at least suspect on several levels. Montaigne is a deeply Pyrrhonian thinker who nevertheless maintains his Christian faith. Instead of reason, Montaigne appeals to custom, Hume's "great guide of life," as a warrant for that belief: "We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans."²⁷ That appeal to custom connects Montaigne to Sextus who articulates a Fourfold way, including custom, of living in accordance with appearances while simultaneously suspending judgment on dogmatic questions (PH 1.11.23). Sextus himself explains that Pyrrhonists may follow the customary religions of the locales in which they find themselves: "following the ordinary view, we affirm undogmatically that gods exist" (PH 3.3.24).²⁸ Pierre Bayle and Pierre-Daniel Huet, both influential with Hume, write about Pyrrhonists accepting theism. Bayle writes in Note C of the *Dictionnaire's* entry on Pyrrho:

It can be seen in Sextus Empiricus that they [the Pyrrhonians] admitted the existence of gods as other philosophers did, that they worshipped them in the customary manner, and that they did not deny their providence. But, in addition to the fact that they never acknowledged a first cause, which might have made them despise the idolatry of their time, it is certain that they believed nothing about the divine nature but with a suspense of judgment, nor confessed any of the things mentioned above, except in a doubtful way, and merely to accommodate themselves to the laws and customs of the age and the country in which they lived.²⁹

More importantly, because Hume calls himself an "Academic" skeptic in the First Enquiry (E.12) and rejects Pyrrhonism there, interpreters, Russell included,

²⁷ Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journals, Letters*, edited and translated by Donald Murdoch Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 2.12, 372.

²⁸ See also: ADO 3.49 [M 9.49]. This is not to say that Sextus has no criticisms of ordinary and customary religious beliefs; at ADO 9.191–92 [M 9.191–92], he complains about the *diaphonia* about the gods characteristic of ordinary life. Hume explicitly cites Sextus only five times. Two of those citations are to M 9 [ADO 3], passages adjacent to those in which Sextus reports that Pyrrhonists conform to the customary practices of religion but do so undogmatically.

²⁹ Pierre Bayle, *Dictionary* (1991), 208, 208n31; Note C of the article on "Pyrrho." Bayle quotes there from La Mothe Le Vayer's *De la vertu des païens*.

take him at his word. There are, however, reasons to read Hume as a Pyrrhonian and to regard his with a hermeneutic of suspicion. I lay out reasons for a hermeneutic of suspicion in some detail in Chapter Four of *Hume's Scepticism*. Largely they include the evident danger of exposing himself entirely and his awareness of that danger.

More philosophically, Book One of the *Treatise* charts a journey from the uniquely "secure foundation" for the sciences offered by the naturalistic and experimental "science of man" in the Introduction to the recognition of T 1.4.7 that instead his investigations have exposed only "those immense depths," seemingly unfathomable by the cognitive capabilities of dogmatic science and the "leaky weather-beaten vessel" upon which he must sail without security. The scope of the skeptical crisis Hume reaches includes all inquiry, not just self-reflection, but it does not, as Ainslie and other suggest, put an end to philosophical self-reflection. Hume understands this as he writes the "Introduction," and so it makes more sense to read his opening remarks as not expressing the findings to which Hume will actually come at the end of Book One's dialectic but rather as the pre-critical and credulous standpoint from which his developmental journey begins. Hume, in fact, explicitly declares an important dimension of this developmental quality at T 1.4.2 where he indicates that he began with a different, narrower, and less skeptical starting point from the endpoint he finally reaches in T 1.4: "I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou'd be the conclusion, I shou'd draw from the whole of my reasoning" (T 1.4.2.56). Where Hume "began" his voyage is different from the point he reaches in T 1.4.7.

Hume lays clues, moreover, even in the Introduction's remarks by prefiguring the skeptical gains he will achieve as his skeptical critique unfolds when he mentions "cautious observations of human life" and his project of attending to its objects of inquiry only "as they appear" in common life, not how they are metaphysically (T 0.10). Hume shifts what he means by "human life" and the "common course of the world" in the Introduction, moving from that starting CLR place with to a skeptical vision of the world as a field of appearances. It is the same move Pyrrhonists make when they figure living in "accordance with appearances" as constitutive of the skeptic's observance of "common life" (PH 1.8.17, PH 1.11.21, PH 1.34.237).

Despite the commonly misunderstood reassertion of nature and common life in the midst of his skeptical crisis, Hume does not abandon the radical skepticism of T 1.4 and return to either scientific or common life realism. An indication of this is clear when in Book 2 of the *Treatise*, for example, well after T 1.4, Hume elaborates on his "cautious" but nevertheless skeptical method by informing readers that steering clear of the *aporia* and absurdity of profound inquiries into the ultimate nature of external objects involves the non-realist limitation of philosophy to appearances. Hume writes there in *Treatise* Book 2 the following:

The essence and composition of external bodies are so obscure, that we must necessarily, in our reasonings, or rather conjectures concerning them, involve ourselves in contradictions and absurdities. But as the perceptions of the mind are perfectly known, and I have us'd all imaginable caution in forming conclusions concerning them, I have always hop'd to keep clear of those contradictions, which have attended every other system. (T 2.2.6.2)

"Every other system," including the vulgar CLR real and the false philosophical real, but not Hume's system of true skeptical philosophy. Skeptical Philo seems to join stoical Cleanthes in this view when at the close of the *Dialogues* he suggests that belief in the deity is, like belief in the external world, un-suspendable or

immune to *epoché*: “So little . . . do I esteem this suspense of judgement in the present case to be possible, that I am apt to suspect there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined” (D 12.6).

Contrary to those who read Hume as a cognitive realist about the world, even in the mitigated way endorsed by Russell, a thoroughgoing skepticism seems a more reasonable reading for these reasons: The skeptical arguments that lead to the crisis of T 1.4.7 are never refuted. Hume is, yes, lifted “fortunately” (T 1.4.7.10) just as Apelles was (PH 1.12.29), out of his skeptical despair; but the restorative reassertion of “nature” (T 1.4.7.9) is non-epistemic and, like Hume’s many appeals to custom and feeling – for example, in his sentimentalist moral theory and his theory of causal reasoning – marks an example of his using the Pyrrhonian Fourfold to guide his philosophical practices. “Nature,” after all, as an independent system of causes and effects had dropped away with the skeptical work of the preceding sections of 1.4.³⁰ It is astonishing to me that so many interpreters, including Russell, have followed Kemp Smith in thinking otherwise. Hume’s appeal to what is “durable and useful” (E 12.3.24) in describing his preference for Academic or mitigated skepticism is plainly also congruent with the Pyrrhonian Fourfold component of *technai*. Montaigne, in a similar spirit, writes in the “Apologie”: “There is nothing of man’s invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness’ as Pyrrhonism.”³¹

Russell’s book ends with an argument for reassessing the general doxography about Hume so that his project is read as one of irreligion rather than an empiricist epistemological enterprise of natural science that reaches interesting and sometimes conflicted skeptical problems. My own reading draws instead from Stephen Buckle’s vision for revising the historiography of early modern British philosophy. In the historiography that I enlist, early modern thought is best understood not as a contest between rationalism and empiricism and ends with Kant’s synthesis, but rather, more accurately, as a struggle between skepticism and dogmatism leading to variously more or less skeptical and dogmatic results, Kant’s among them.³² In Russell’s account, an historiography organized around irreligion allows readers not only to fully understand the particular arguments in Hume’s texts. Russell writes that the irreligious hermeneutical axis also makes “cohere” the various strands of Hume’s thought – epistemological, political, moral, historical, and theological (420, 424, 441). Reading Hume’s project as centrally irreligious solves the “riddle” of his *Treatise*, and it brings unity to his corpus as a whole.

But so does reading Hume as a radical Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptic. Russell appeals to Hume’s quotation from Book One of Tacitus’s second-century *Histories* on the title page of the *Treatise* as a signal to careful readers of his alignment with “atheist” Spinoza. (Spinoza uses the same quotation both at the beginning of the final chapter and in the preface of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published posthumously in 1677 for prudential reasons.) But the quotation also appears in the article on Tacitus in skeptic Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire*, a provenance that would have signaled skepticism rather than irreligion as the subtext of what follows.³³

³⁰ For a skeptical reading of Hume’s naturalism and the reassertion of nature at T 1.4.7.9, see Chapter Five, “*Phúsis*: The Fatalities of Appearance,” of *Hume’s Scepticism*.

³¹ Montaigne, “Apologie,” *Essays* (1958), 2.12, 375.

³² Stephen Buckle, “British Sceptical Realism: A Fresh Look at the British Tradition,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 7.1 (1999): 1–29.

³³ The quote appears in the [A] subtext of the entry on “Tacitus (Caius (a) Cornelius)” in Bayle’s *Dictionnaire*, though Bayle seems to have punctuated it differently. In Bayle’s rendering, it reads: “rara tempo- rum

Or the epigram may have signified both skepticism and irreligion to readers. It is indeed difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate the irreligious from the skeptical in Hume, and arguing that one or the other is more fundamental evoke the mere “dispute of words” that, in Philo’s estimation at D 12.6, separates his own position from Cleanthes’s – if one takes Philo seriously in that remark. What, then, if any may be said in favor of placing the center of gravity of Hume’s texts closer his skepticism than irreligion? Why read the irreligion as flowing from the skepticism rather than the other way around?

For one thing, Hume characterizes his own thought as skepticism, more than once.³⁴ I don’t think it safe to identify Hume with Philo in the *Dialogues*, but that nomenclature does suggest that he has aligned himself with the constellation of ideas related to Philonian scepticism – that is, the radical skepticism of Philo of Larrisa, whose intellectual lineage runs back through Clitomachus and Carneades and the Academics’ intellectual contests with stoics such as Cleanthes (Arcesilaus’s adversary) and Chryssipus (Carneades’s opponent).

Secondly, A skeptical reading also resolves the “riddle” of Hume’s *Treatise* by subordinating the naturalism to the skepticism. Because the skeptical arguments of T 1.4.7 are not refuted, the “nature” that reasserts itself and that will then subsequently underwrite his naturalistic philosophy cannot be an independent or external causal order. Hume transforms the concept of “nature” so that it becomes congruent with the *physis* of the Pyrrhonian Fourfold. Surpassing Sextus, as I argue in Chapter Five of *Hume’s Scepticism*, Hume develops a proto-phenomenological sense of nature as the unbidden “press” or “animal *nisus*” (E 7.1.15) of human experience and as what I call the “fatalities of appearance.” Nature, for Hume, is that “current of nature” (T 1.4.7.10) characteristic of the “most natural course of things” (ES “Of Commerce,” 260); it is those dimensions of appearances that are “difficult to resist” (E 12.2.22) to which humans seem fated.

Thirdly, unlike any realist interpretation of Hume – hard or soft, moderate or thoroughgoing – only a radically skeptical reading can adequately explain how Hume goes on with philosophical investigations that endorse natural science in the ways that are non-epistemic. It does so by showing how Hume both applies the Pyrrhonian Fourfold to philosophical practice and draws from Academical traditions that develop akataleptic (non-epistemic) *pithanon* and *probabilia* rather than kataleptic (epistemically capable) criteria of knowledge that claim to have apprehended the real truth about real being. Any other strategy must either unreasonably jettison the deep skeptical implications of Hume’s reasoning (e.g., Ainslie), settle for a schizoid “two Hume” model (e.g., Pierris), or misrepresent Hume’s appeal to imaginative titles and warrants as epistemically knowledge-yielding (e.g., Garrett). Because Russell’s “hard” atheism requires a moderate realism reading is another two-Hume model, and because it requires realism, it cannot bring unity to his thought. The radicalism of Hume’s skepticism is also deflated, though it is not fully ignored. But what then about the arguments concerning religion that Russell identifies which go farther than *isosthenia* (balance) and seem to conclude with the metaphysically-theologically “hard” and negative conclusion that God does not exist? The skeptical reading offers several resources for responding.

felicitate, ubi senitire quæ velis; & quæ sentias dicere licet?; Bayle, *Dictionary* (1738), 5.279. My thanks to Aaron Garrett for informing me about Bayle’s use of this quote.

³⁴ T 1.4.2.2, T 1.4.7.14, T 1.4.7.15, T App.21; E 12.22, and famously at E 12.24, where he aligns himself with a “mitigated or academical scepticism” in contrast to an extreme Pyrrhonism.

1. Understanding Hume as a radical epistemic skeptic means that no arguments, including the problem of evil and those others that Russell cites can be understood to be kataleptic. That the similarity between mysticism and atheism disqualifies mysticism from justification does not entail that mysticism's claims are false.

2. As Mike Ridge has argued, the persistence of reasoning in Hume is better understood to advance moral and political rather than epistemic objectives.³⁵ A suspensive Pyrrhonian and radically Clitomachian skepticism are sufficient to accomplish the moral and political tasks of irreligion.

3. A "hard" atheist position, on the other hand, condemns Hume to the dogmatic entanglements of Sisyphus and Tantalus (T 1.4.3.9; and the reason for the cover image of *Hume's Scepticism*): seeking truth about God, though it "for ever flies us; and seek for it in a place, where 'tis impossible it can ever exist." Russell's reading leaves Hume entangled in those toxic lines of thinking, grasping for what it seems one cannot apprehend; and it ultimately abandons Hume to the rocky "frith" of despair that awaits all those with dogmatic aspirations who encounter skeptical limits and respond with integrity to the reasons for them.³⁶

4. While Hume's arguments appear dogmatic in their negative judgment concerning God's existence, in the general context in which he wrote, they may function as instruments of *isosthenia*. Sextus writes that skeptical discipline (*agoge*) comprises advancing arguments against dogmatic arguments towards the end of *epoché* and *ataraxia* (PH 1.4.8, 1.5.11, 1.27.202). The "methodological doubt" of Descartes's "Meditation One" is also frequently misunderstood simply as adopting a negative epistemological positions (that one practicing this doubt should be regarded as false), even if provisionally adopted. But Descartes does so to balance his previous theoretical and ordinary beliefs, not to establish a new, temporary dogmatism. Cartesian methodological doubt, like Hume's negative theological implications, function as acts of *isosthenia* not negative dogmatism.

5. Any dogmatic conclusions to which Hume might be led ought also be attenuated in light of the caveat he offers readers at the closing of *Treatise* 1:

On such an occasion we are apt not only to forget our scepticism, but even our modesty too; and make use of such terms as these, '*tis evident*, '*tis certain*, '*tis undeniable*; which a due deference to the public ought, perhaps, to prevent. I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others; but I here enter a *caveat* against any objections, which may be offer'd on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other. (T 1.4.7.15)

³⁵ Michael Ridge, "Epistemology Moralized: David Hume's Practical Epistemology," *Hume Studies* 29.2 (2003): 165–204.

³⁶ Dogmatists, Cicero writes, "cling as to a rock [*saxum*] to whatever theory they are carried to by stress of weather [*tempestate*]"; but scepticism, according to Cicero, sets people free from dogmatic masters to whom they fearfully cling in their epistemic angst (ACD, 2.3.8–9). It is the Pyrrhonian Fourfold and the Academic *pitbanon* that frees Hume from the firch so that he could sail on in his search, on "those immense" and unfathomed depths in his "leaky weather-beaten vessel."

Hume's apparent dogmatism may simply exemplify forgetful and immodest moment of hard atheism.

6. Montaigne and Bayle both explain how skepticism embraces variability in position and diversity in thinking about issues under investigation, in contrast to the univocal and entirely unified positions to which dogmatists aspire. In the very first article of his collected *Essays*, "By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End" (1581), Montaigne writes the following about human beings and about his text: "Truly man is a marvelously vain, divers, and undulating object. It is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him."³⁷ Bayle follows Montaigne in this rhetorical method, describing his in his writing in the *Pensée diverses* (*nota bene* the title) as a city, the building of which is accomplished only in disjointed increments, at different times, irregularly, and is repaired in the same fashion (*se bâtit en divers temps, et se repare tantôt en un lieu, tantôt une autre*).³⁸ Hume's thought on religion similarly, in its presentation, "oscillates" between hard and soft atheism (327).

Hume's 'Natural History of Religion', his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, important components of his *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*, and various of his essays launch devastating critiques of modern rationalistic religion, natural theology, and traditionalist religious practices. Hume undermines theism with a naturalistic account of the development of religious dogma and with penetrating philosophical criticisms of: human superiority; theistic teleology; intelligent design (D 2–8, 11–12); theodicy (D 10–11); the ontological and cosmological arguments (D 9); the rationality of belief in immortality, providence (E 11) and miracles (E 12); and theological claims about the nature of God (E 12).

In opposition, moreover, to conservative religious doctrine, Hume's moral theory is naturalistic and Ciceronian. It rejects "monkish" Christian character virtues such as humility, poverty and meekness (EM 9.3, N 10.2), including the chastity enforced by "vain superstition" (ES 145). Hume's texts delegitimize prohibitions against suicide in cases of extreme suffering; and they praise pride, luxury, and wealth. Religion produces socially, politically, and personally dangerous "enthusiasms" and "superstitions." At the close of the first *Enquiry*, Hume (in)famously commits "to the flames" books of "divinity," condemning them as "nothing but sophistry and illusion" (E 12.34).

On the other hand, just as nature reasserts itself in the face of skeptical corrosives, Hume, via Cleanthes, says that the natural flow also presses us towards theistic belief: "tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation" (D 3.7). In the Appendix to the *Treatise* (1740), Hume writes about how design proves something like God's existence: "The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind" (T 1.3.14.12n30App.); and seventeen years later, in 'The Natural History of Religion' (1757), he argues that the natural fit of things leads naturally to monotheism: 'Every thing is adjusted to every thing. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author' (N 2.2). There is even an aesthetic dimension to this causal inference: "All the new discoveries in astronomy, which prove the immense grandeur and magnificence of the

³⁷ Montaigne, "By Diverse Means," *Essays* (1958), 1.1, 5.

³⁸ *Apud* Brahami, *Travail* (2001), 48, 79.

works of Nature, are so many additional arguments for a Deity, according to the true system of Theism” (D 5.2).

Hume gives voice to the humanizing effect of religion in a preface he wrote in 1756, but withheld from publication, for the second volume released of the *History of England* (1757, today’s Volume 6). A shortened version of that preface was buried in a footnote. Hume later revised that text and placed it in the mouth of Cleanthes in the closing section of the *Dialogues*:

The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition (D 12.12). Hume goes so far in the *History* as to maintain that ‘there must be an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community’ (H 3.29.134–5). Again, in the “Natural History,” he writes: “Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: if you find them at all, be assured, that they are but a few degrees removed from brutes” (N 15.9).

The irreligious interpretive framework must discount the positive claims Hume makes, and that reading is not entirely without merit. But the skeptical framework accounts for these contrarities more easily and sensibly. Hume’s different and incongruous claims about God and religion represent not only the diversity of thinking characteristic of skepticism. They also fit snugly into skepticism’s practice of *isosthenia* and addressing different dogmatic pathologies in different contexts.

7. That qualified contextualism is important, and skeptical thinking is qualified in several ways. Pyrrhonians report what appears, but they also qualify those descriptions to the way things appear to a particular circumstance (PH 1.1.4) – an individual, at a particular place, at a particular time. Hume’s skeptical texts, therefore, must be understood in their context. Hume’s context was dominantly superstitious, enthusiastic, and theocratic; and there can be little doubt that he worked to oppose those pathologies. As Russell acknowledges, however, Hume does not aim to eradicate “all religion” (291, 378, and much of Chapter Thirteen). Understanding that Hume’s thought is fundamentally skeptical, however, illuminates his response to that context through skeptical practices, including the deployment of skeptical argumentative *tropoi* and tactics designed to produce *isosthenia*.

One could go on. Despite my disagreements with the scope and central thrust of Russell’s work, it accomplishes a great deal in shifting the center of gravity away from the dominant frameworks of interpretation. Readings that focus on Hume as a naturalist struggling with skepticism but in ways that don’t fundamentally challenge the epistemological realism of natural science in light of both Russell’s and my own work look increasingly tendentious and blindered by an obsequious posture to the dogmatism of scientific realism and the anti-skeptical animus of so much analytic philosophy. The eighteenth and nineteenth-century’s dominant reading of Hume was as an irreligious nihilist, and the twentieth-century’s dominant reading was to see him as an anti-skeptical or sometimes moderately skeptical naturalist. The days of those readings are numbered. Having worked our way dialectically through and out of these readings, the twenty-first century is now ready to read him as a comprehensively naturalistic, irreligious, and radical skeptic.

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