

# Hume's Gambit: Irreligion, Animals, and Truth

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*Abstract:* In this paper I develop an irreligious reading of Hume's decision to return to philosophy after his sceptical crisis at the end of Book One of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Any irreligious reading of Hume's epistemology must articulate Hume's epistemic grounds for preferring his experimental science of human nature to sophisticated superstitious anthropologies. I argue that Hume believes his use of animal analogies to confirm his hypotheses offers him the best possible "security" against positing false causal claims about the nature of our "mental operations", and that the superior security of this experimental method of reasoning provides him with epistemic grounds for preferring his science of human nature to superstitious metaphysics, even though both have title to our assent. I conclude by suggesting that in continuing to philosophise after his sceptical crisis, Hume risks his intellectual reputation on a bet that "the latest posterity" will find his science of human nature a surer path to useful truths than superstition, because his experimental philosophy of human nature is the most epistemically secure form of anthropology there is. This irreligious gambit, I claim, is the origin of Hume's philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

One of the more compelling recent narratives concerning Hume's philosophy is that tensions between the sceptical and naturalistic currents in his thought can be eased, if not resolved, by viewing him as a fundamentally irreligious thinker. Paul Russell develops this line at length in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion* (Russell, 2008), and similar positions can be found in Thomas Holden's *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism* (Holden, 2010) and Edward Craig's *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Craig, 1987). The core thesis of irreligious readings is that Hume's philosophy is sceptical to the extent that it epistemically destabilises religious metaphysics, but is otherwise naturalistic, and intentionally so. The thesis is compelling, in large part, because it clearly aligns with Hume's intentions for his later philosophy, as set out in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Here any scepticism is well

understood as specifically targeting religious metaphysics, if not explicitly advertised as such.<sup>1</sup> The novelty of the thesis – which is where its real value lies – consists in reading irreligious intent back into the origins of Hume’s philosophy, back to *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), where any irreligion is often self-consciously disavowed, and the character of Hume’s scepticism, and also his naturalism, are themselves much murkier.<sup>2</sup>

It is something of an embarrassment, then, that irreligious readings of Hume’s *Treatise* are so little helpful where we might hope that they were most: namely, when interpreting the famous sceptical dilemma that Hume finds himself in at the conclusion of Book One. Here it is clear that Hume’s scepticism is not aimed at religious metaphysics. Rather, Hume’s target is simply metaphysics, understood as refined reasoning that aims at truth. His own naturalistic brand of metaphysics is as much a target of such scepticism as are superstitious speculations concerning Adam’s love of God in the Garden of Eden, and neither come out unscathed. Hume does, of course, “make bold to recommend philosophy” over “superstition of every kind” (T 1.4.7.13),<sup>3</sup> but it is not clear that he has *epistemic* grounds to do so.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even those who advocate naturalistic readings of Hume’s epistemic position at the end of Book One – on which Hume comes through his sceptical crisis with epistemic warrant to continue philosophising – have struggled to explain how Hume might justify an epistemic preference for philosophy over superstition, as opposed to a merely practical preference.<sup>5</sup> This problem is even more acute for those who hope to square Hume’s naturalism with his scepticism by appealing to an overarching irreligious intent.

So, must we conclude that Hume’s *Treatise* epistemology is a wayward opening shot in his battle against superstition in the science of human nature, but that his aim improves over time? Hsueh Qu has recently argued for this sort of conclusion, embedded within a larger story about Hume’s epistemological evolution (Qu, 2020). Without wanting to prejudice our reading of Hume as a philosopher whose epistemology develops throughout his career – on this point I side with Qu – I will argue here that hope for a successful irreligious reading of Hume’s *Treatise* epistemology is not yet lost. That Hume emerges from his sceptical spiral at the end of Book One confident that his experimental approach to the study of human nature is

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the concluding section of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (“Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy”).

<sup>2</sup> On the disavowing of irreligion in the *Treatise* see Russell (2008), 267-78.

<sup>3</sup> References to ‘T’ are to David Hume, (1739-40 [2007]) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.)), Oxford: Clarendon Press), with book, part, section, and, where appropriate, paragraph numbers.

<sup>4</sup> See here Winkler (1999), 183–212; Ainslie (2015), 233; and Qu (2020), 152-8.

<sup>5</sup> For an up-to-date account of such struggles see Qu (2020), 152-8.

epistemically preferable to superstition, and with well-founded ambitions to eliminate religious metaphysics from the science of man.

My argument has three parts. In section 1 I revisit, briefly, the “dangerous dilemma” that Hume identifies in the conclusion to Book One. Here I adopt a naturalistic reading of Hume’s response in the style once proposed by Henry Allison: on which what has come to be known as Hume’s ‘Title Principle’ is understood as a second-order normative principle that licenses exceptions to the first-order “LOGIC” that he sets out in *Treatise* 1.3.15 (“*Rules by which to judge of causes and effects*”) (Allison, 2005, 2008). Allison-style naturalistic readings are unable, of themselves, to offer any epistemic grounds for preferring philosophy to superstition, but this is a problem for all naturalistic readings. On the other hand, such readings avoid the most damaging criticisms levelled at first-order naturalistic interpretations, of the sort first proposed by Don Garrett (Garrett, 1997), and are therefore the most promising type of naturalistic reading available.

In section 2 I argue that although *both* Hume’s science of human nature *and* logically sound superstitious anthropologies are entitled to assent – by Hume’s own lights – Hume nevertheless understands his “experimental method of reasoning” to provide greater “security” against proclaiming falsehoods than any other method of reasoning. Here I claim that such “security” operates similarly to contemporary notions of ‘safety’ conditions on knowledge claims, relativised to methods. Where a method of reasoning is more secure, vis-à-vis any other, when it is more difficult to form false hypotheses using that method.<sup>6</sup> Most precisely, I claim that Hume believes his use of animal analogies to confirm his anthropological hypotheses offers him the best possible protection against confusing explanatorily superfluous phenomena for explanatorily essential phenomena in the science of human nature. This being the case, Hume has *epistemic* grounds to prefer his experimentally formed hypotheses to superstitious speculations, even though the well-formed conclusions of both are entitled to our assent.<sup>7</sup>

In section 3 I examine the much-discussed role of curiosity and ambition in motivating Hume’s return to philosophy. Here I argue that the primary connection between Hume’s epistemology and his philosophical motivations lies in the comparison he draws between the

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<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this comparison is a loose one. Yet it is still instructive (see footnote 30 below).

<sup>7</sup> A point of order, for the sake of clarity. I argue in section 2 that, for Hume, an hypothesis is ‘entitled to assent’ if it accords with both his rules of logic and the ‘Title Principle’. Humean ‘security’, as I envisage it, does not confer further entitlement to assent. Rather, Humean ‘security’ serves to determine the comparative epistemic warrant of those hypotheses that are entitled to our assent: where for any two hypotheses that are entitled to our assent, we have epistemic warrant to prefer whichever hypothesis is the most secure – where the security of an hypothesis is a matter of its having been produced by a secure method of reasoning. If two hypotheses are both entitled to our assent and are equally secure, then our preferences ought to be determined by our evidence for each. I set this out in detail in section 3.2.

passion for philosophy and the passions for hunting and gambling. As I see it, Hume risks his intellectual reputation on a bet that “the latest posterity” will find his science of human nature a surer path to useful truths than superstition – not because he can show that his experimental moral philosophy is more entitled to our assent than a sophisticated superstitious anthropology – but because his experimental philosophy of human nature is the most epistemically secure form of anthropology there is. This irreligious gambit, I claim, is the origin of Hume’s philosophy.

## 2. The “Dangerous Dilemma” and the ‘Title Principle’

### 2.1. The “Dangerous Dilemma”

In the last section of Book One of the *Treatise* – titled “*Conclusion of this book*” – Hume pauses to take stock of his “present station”, before launching out into the “immense depths of philosophy” (T 1.4.7.1). What follows has been described as “the most challenging fifteen paragraphs in the literature on scepticism”<sup>8</sup> and, probably not coincidentally, “the most literary stretch of writing in the English-language philosophical canon”<sup>9</sup>. As is by now well known, Hume soon finds himself in what he calls a “dangerous dilemma”, seemingly faced with a decision between “a false reason, and none at all” (T 1.4.7.6-7). Although not for very long. For, having dined with friends, and after a game of backgammon, he is disposed to philosophise again, such that he would “*feel*” himself “a loser in point of pleasure” were he to refrain from continuing on with the search after truth. And this, he says, “is the origin of my philosophy” (T 1.4.7.12).

There has been much ink spilt trying to understand what exactly is going on in the conclusion to Book One.<sup>10</sup> Since my aim here is to advocate for an existing style of naturalistic reading, I will keep the details to the minimum that are relevant. Any attempt to square Hume’s naturalism and his scepticism must address what Donald Ainslie has called the “*normativity problem*”<sup>11</sup>. That is, the problem of integrating the normativity of nature with the normativity of reason and thereby explaining “how Hume’s psychology of belief acquires a normative edge”<sup>12</sup>. For current purposes I am content to show only that, on the supposition that a certain

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<sup>8</sup> Schmitt (2014), 341.

<sup>9</sup> Ainslie (2015), 218.

<sup>10</sup> For an accessible general overview see Qu (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Ainslie (2015), 230-3.

<sup>12</sup> Williams (2004, 269) quoted in Ainslie (2015), 232 fn. 32.

general type of naturalistic reading can be defended, then problems regarding the epistemic preferability of philosophy to superstition can be solved.

To this end we can see Hume's dilemma as originating from the fact that, for him, "[t]he memory, senses, and understanding are ... all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas" (T 1.4.7.3). More precisely, Hume's problems follow from his belief that the imaginative foundation of the understanding – that is, the faculty by which we reason our way to beliefs – consists in our being habitually determined to "form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others" on the basis of what we have experienced in the past (T 1.4.7.3). This, Hume thinks, is the way in which we form all our causal beliefs; such that any science of human nature, his own included, ultimately reduces to a methodically refined set of such habitually enlivened beliefs regarding the causes of human phenomena.

That our scientific beliefs are formed in this way is a problem because the imagination, of itself, is an "inconstant and fallacious principle" and were we to "assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy" (i.e., to every idea that the imagination presents to us in a lively manner) then we would be "lead into such errors, absurdities and obscurities, that we must at last become ashamed of our credulity" (T 1.4.7.4-6). Thus, Hume is faced with the question of determining "how far we ought to yield" to what the imagination presents to us as assent-worthy (T 1.4.7.6), which is to say: when is it that we ought to assent to the vivacious products of the imagination, given that the imagination is *both* the foundation of the "understanding" *and* an "inconstant and fallacious principle"?

One solution that Hume suggests is to "reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding, that is, to the general and more established properties of the imagination" (T 1.4.7.7). In itself this seems a good solution. To the question of how far we ought to yield to the products of the imagination, we answer: we ought only to assent to those beliefs we form on account of the understanding, itself understood as the "general and more established properties of the imagination".

Yet there is a major problem lurking. For Hume had previously argued that "the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life" (T 1.4.7.7). More precisely, Hume had argued that although "[o]ur reason must be considered as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect" it is nevertheless, "such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented" (T 1.4.1.1). As such, Hume claims, "[w]e must

... in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or control on our first judgement or belief” (T 1.4.1.1).

The problem, however, is that – as Hume puts it:

When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment, I have less confidence in my opinions, than when I only consider the objects concerning which I reason; and when I proceed still farther, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of my faculties, all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence. (T 1.4.1.6)

What we find, then, is that a rigid application of “the rules of logic” ends up destroying all our beliefs, because our doing so iteratively reduces our evidence for our opinions to almost nothing. That is, it iteratively reduces the “force and vigour” (T 1.4.1.6) with which we entertain those ideas, which is what Hume takes our evidence for them to consist in.

In fact, the only thing, Hume thinks, that keeps us from “total scepticism” is “the singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things” (T 1.4.7.7), such that we are only able check up on our original judgements one or two times, after which “the action of the mind becomes forc’d and unnatural” (T 1.4.1.10) and we give up. This, then, is Hume’s dilemma: if we “reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy” then we must also reject the “trivial property” that makes following up on our judgements difficult, and if we do this then the understanding subverts itself and we end up with “total scepticism”. As Hume puts it: “We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.7).

Hume’s dilemma sends him into a splanetic humour. He sees no obligation to make “such an abuse of time” as to continue with philosophy, and he asserts that philosophy itself “has nothing to oppose” such “sentiments” (T 1.4.7.10-11). Instead “philosophy ... expects victory more from the returns of a serious good-humour’d disposition, than the force of reason and conviction” (T 1.4.7.11). Hume sums up his standoffish attitude to philosophising with the claim that:

if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11)

In his own case, it just so happens that he “cannot forbear having a curiosity” to discover the principles of human nature, and that when he thinks about his doing so he feels “an ambition arise ... of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries” (T 1.4.7.12). “These sentiments spring up naturally” he says, and he would “*feel* [himself] a loser in point of pleasure” (T 1.4.7.12) were he to attempt to stifle them. And with this he returns to philosophy.

## 2.2. The ‘Title Principle’

How should we understand Hume’s return to philosophy in the face of the dangerous dilemma? Here, what has come to be known as the ‘Title Principle’ - *Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us* – has dominated recent discussions. Don Garrett first proposed that the ‘Title Principle’ provides Hume with an epistemic norm for sorting good reasoning from bad in his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (Garrett, 1997).<sup>13</sup> As Garrett sees things, the ‘Title Principle’ *disentitles* the destructive iterative reasoning that leads to “total scepticism” – since such reason neither mixes with any propensity, nor is lively – while at the same time it *entitles* Hume’s own philosophy to assent – insofar as Hume’s conclusions are the lively products of an ambitious curiosity.<sup>14</sup> As such it is the ‘Title Principle’ that gives Hume’s psychology of belief a normative edge, and specifically an epistemic normative edge.

Ainslie, amongst others, has questioned whether Hume’s talk of some reasonings having title to our assent, and others not, was intended to be normative. Instead, Ainslie sees Hume as giving a description of his situation, upon the realisation that the dangerous dilemma is in fact insoluble.<sup>15</sup> For my part, I find it hard to read the ‘ought’ in “[w]here reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to” as descriptive rather than normative.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, I think it natural to read the ‘Title Principle’ as intended to disentitle the specific application of “the rules of logic” that leads to “total scepticism”. In fact I regard this as the enduring insight of Garrett’s naturalistic reading of Hume’s return to philosophy.

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<sup>13</sup> For Garrett’s most recent statement of his view see Garrett (2016).

<sup>14</sup> See Garrett (2016), 38-42.

<sup>15</sup> Ainslie (2015), 233.

<sup>16</sup> On this point see also Qu (2020), 126-7.

Yet if Garrett's reading of the 'Title Principle' shows how Hume is able to avoid total scepticism, it also seems to saddle Hume with a "false reason". Hsueh Qu has recently put this point in terms of the "truth-insensitivity" of the 'Title Principle'.<sup>17</sup> Here Qu argues that insofar as the 'Title Principle' grounds epistemically justified reasoning upon our "propensities", then the 'Title Principle' "founds epistemic justification on factors which are not themselves sensitive to truth, insofar as they do not systematically co-vary with the truth"<sup>18</sup>. As such, if the 'Title Principle' is in fact a principle of epistemic merit and demerit, as Garrett insists, then it would seem that Hume does not accord epistemic merit solely to the value of truth, nor epistemic demerit solely to the disvalue of falsehood. Rather, it would seem that Hume countenances some other sort of epistemic merit that is entirely unrelated to truth. And, even worse, that the vast majority of our beliefs have this sort of epistemic merit, whether true or false, whether superstitious or mundane.

This, I think, is a knock-down argument against Garrett's reading of the 'Title Principle'. Although, at the same time, I believe that what Qu has identified as the "truth-insensitivity" of the 'Title Principle' is less of a bug than a feature. For it seems to me that the best overall reading of the role that the 'Title Principle' plays in Hume's return to philosophy is that it functions as what Henry Allison calls a "second-order normative principle"<sup>19</sup>. Here, rather than the 'Title Principle' *alone* serving to determine epistemic merit and demerit, such merit and demerit are initially determined by the "*Rules by which to judge of causes and effects*" that Hume sets out in *Treatise* 1.3.15.<sup>20</sup> Hume refers to these rules as his "LOGIC" (T 1.3.15.11), and, as such, it makes good interpretive sense to see the reflexive application of these "rules" as governing epistemic merit and demerit: where reasoning that, upon reflection, is seen to accord with the "rules of logic" is good reasoning, whereas that which does not is bad reasoning. For, insofar as our reason is "a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect" (1.4.1.1), then logical reasoning is more likely to be true than illogical reasoning is.

The role of the 'Title Principle' is then to license our suspending assent to some applications of the rules of logic, while retaining it in others.<sup>21</sup> For example: We saw above

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<sup>17</sup> Qu (2020), 159-66.

<sup>18</sup> Qu (2020), 159.

<sup>19</sup> Allison (2005), 335.

<sup>20</sup> Allison provides an illuminating comparison of his view with Garrett's at Allison (2005), 335 fn. 31.

<sup>21</sup> This interpretation of the 'Title Principle' requires reading Hume's reference to "reason" in "Where reason is lively..." as referring specifically to logical reasoning, or to reflective applications of the rules of logic in hypothesis formation. This is unfortunate. Still, any reading of Hume's position in *Treatise* 1.4.7 will require one to make substantive interpretive decisions, and here, given that Hume addresses the 'Title Principle' to philosophers ("if we are philosophers...") the restriction of his sense of "reason" to logical reasoning has *prima facie* textual support.



that in the case of the iterated reasoning that leads to “total scepticism”, it is our fastidiously following “all the rules of logic” that produces “a total extinction of belief and evidence” (T 1.4.1.6). It turns out, however, that since this specific application of the rules of logic is neither lively, nor mixes with any propensity, it “can never have any title” to our assent.

For, having hit upon the ‘Title Principle’, we find that for any piece of reasoning to have title to our assent is not simply for it to accord with the rules of logic, but to do so in a lively manner, and to mix with some propensity. This naturalistic-yet-sceptical insight into the nature of justification is something that Hume discovers as a result of his philosophical reflections in *Treatise* 1.4.7, such that the ‘Title Principle’ can be understood as a *sceptical* second-order epistemic principle that modifies the first-order naturalistic norms of reasoning set out in his “LOGIC”. As Allison puts it, the ‘Title Principle’ captures Hume’s “philosophical insouciance”<sup>22</sup>. That, as a “true sceptic” (see T 1.4.7.14), he ought to be as diffident towards the sceptical doubts that he has arrived at through applying the rules of logic to mental phenomena, as he is towards the philosophical convictions that he arrived at in the same way.

It is not my intention to defend Allison’s specific understanding of the ‘Title Principle’. My claim, rather, is that reading the ‘Title Principle’ as a second-order normative principle is the most promising form of naturalistic reading available. Here it might be objected, as it has against Garrett, that Hume seems to adopt the so-called ‘Title Principle’ for *no* reason – it is more the product of a returning good-humour than it is of considered reflection, and therefore does not warrant the status of a ‘principle’, whether first- or second-order.<sup>23</sup> Compare here Hume’s eight “[r]ules by which to judge of causes and effects”, which are explicitly justified on the basis of the psychological analysis of causal reasoning that he had developed across Book One, Part Three, “*Of knowledge and probability*”.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps. But I also think a case can be made that Hume adopts the ‘Title Principle’ *because* it serves as a means of preserving a sceptical attitude towards philosophy amidst the return of a “good-humoured disposition”. For recall that Hume attributes his sceptical rejection of philosophy to his “spleen and indolence”, and he contends that “philosophy has nothing to oppose” such “sentiments”, but rather “expects a victory more from the returns of a serious good-humour’d disposition, than from the force of reason and conviction” (T 1.4.7.11). One way to interpret Hume here is that he expects philosophy to win out over scepticism once his “spleen and indolence” subside and he regains a “serious good-humour’d disposition”. Against

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<sup>22</sup> Allison (2005), 335.

<sup>23</sup> See here Qu (2020), 147-52; and Millican (2016), 105, fn. 42.

<sup>24</sup> See T 1.3.15

the background of Hume's shifting affections, the 'Title Principle' serves to preserve something of his sceptical sentiments against any tendency to dogmatically assert the truth of his philosophical conclusions – such as the iterated reasoning that leads to “total scepticism” – once he is in a better humour.

Towards this point, it is notable that Hume warns his reader that he himself has “fallen into this [dogmatic] fault” on many occasions – often using phrases like “*'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable*” (T 1.4.7.15). Still, Hume thinks it better to issue a general caveat against taking such proclamations literally than to continually check himself “in so natural a propensity” (T 1.4.7.15). This is worth noting because it shows that Hume thinks a dogmatical spirit is natural to philosophers, but that it nevertheless remains a “fault” to “forget our scepticism” (T 1.4.7.15). What I am suggesting is that Hume sees the 'Title Principle' as a reminder to remain sceptical, and thus to only assent to logical reasoning that is lively and mixes with some propensity. As such, I contend that the 'Title Principle' has a distinctly sceptical rationale within Hume's naturalistic epistemology, namely, it provides a principled balance to his natural dogmatism, when in a good-humour, by preserving a tincture of his sceptical spleen. This, it is also worth noting, is exactly how we might expect a second-order epistemic norm to behave.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Sophisticated Superstitions and Animal Analogies

#### 3.1. Sophisticated Superstitions

Presuming, then, that an Allison-style reading of the 'Title Principle' is defensible, the problem remains that such readings cannot, on their own, sort naturalistic philosophies from sophisticated superstitions in terms of their likely truth value. Allison calls this the “scope problem” for Hume's 'Title Principle'<sup>26</sup>. For, having decided upon a return to philosophy,

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Goldhaber has recently argued that Hume speaks of his scepticism primarily in terms of sceptical sentiments, passions, dispositions and humors, and only secondarily in terms of sceptical principles and of scepticism as a system of thought (Goldhaber (Forthcoming), 31-41). One of the advantages of Allison-style 'second-order' readings of the 'Title Principle', I think, is that such readings capture Hume's concern to cultivate a healthy epistemic disposition – in which any sanguine dogmatism is tempered by sceptical spleen – in terms of a balance between first and second-order epistemic norms.

<sup>26</sup> Allison (2005), 336-7. Allison himself does not seem to think that this is much of a problem, which is fitting, as Allison's chief concern is whether Hume is justified in relying upon the 'Title Principle' as he (Allison) interprets it. For Allison is it enough that Hume has pragmatic grounds for rejecting superstition. Still, Ainslie objects to Allison's reading of the 'Title Principle' precisely on the grounds that it “leaves Hume without adequate normative resources to object when, say, an enthusiast or a false philosopher embraces her or his own particular ... dogmatism” (Ainslie (2015), 233 fn.35).

Hume goes on to remark that it is “almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action” (T 1.4.7.13). This being the case, we all – both vulgar and refined reasoners alike – are forced to decide which is our best “guide” in metaphysical enquires: between *philosophy*, understood as systematic enquiry into “the causes and principles [of] the phænomena, which appear in the visible world” (T 1.4.7.13), and *superstition*, which does not “content” itself with mundane phenomena, but “opens a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (T 1.4.7.13). Here Hume notes that “superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, [and] it seizes ... strongly on the mind”, yet he “make[s] bold to recommend philosophy”, on the ground that “errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous” (T 1.4.7.13).

There is nothing very surprising about Hume’s recommendation of philosophy over superstition. It is strikingly incongruous, however, that immediately after having claimed that “[w]here reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to”, Hume gives a clear indication that superstitious metaphysics both mixes with our propensities and is an especially lively form of reasoning: “superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, [and] it seizes ... strongly on the mind”. This being the case, superstitious speculations regarding novel scenes and beings are as much in accord with the ‘Title Principle’ as are philosophical examinations into the causes and principles of visible phenomena.<sup>27</sup> Nor does it help to read the ‘Title Principle’ as a second-order principle that governs when we ought to assent to reasoning that follows the rules of logic. For the rules of logic serve only to apply constraints upon the proper formation of causal hypotheses, given the nature of causal relations (“the cause must be prior to the effect” (T 1.3.15.4), “the same cause always produces the same effect” (T 1.3.15.6), etc.). They do not serve to constrain the content of causal hypotheses (‘Eve’s temptation of Adam was prior to his Fall’, ‘All Adam’s progeny are sinners on account of his Original Sin’). Thus, by Hume’s lights, superstitious reasoning that follows the rules of logic is an equally good guide to the true nature of things as is his own brand of experimental philosophy, even if more “dangerous” when false.

It would seem, then, that irreligious readings of Hume’s intentions for the *Treatise* can only get us so far. That, paradoxically, Hume’s most explicitly irreligious proclamation in the

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting here that, by Hume’s lights, superstitious metaphysics is as much concerned with the phenomena of the “visible world” as philosophy is. The crucial difference is that superstitious metaphysics “opens up a world of its own” in order to explain what we ‘see’ in the “visible world” (e.g., that the failure of a crop is divine revenge for sinful behaviour). For more here see Hume’s essay ‘*Of superstition and enthusiasm*’ in his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary, Part 1* (1741).

*Treatise* – that we ought to prefer philosophy to superstition because “errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous” – serves to heighten the tensions between the sceptical and naturalistic currents in his thought. For even if Hume manages to emerge from his dangerous dilemma with grounds to believe that he is epistemically justified in continuing to philosophise, he has no such grounds to believe that he is *better* justified in applying the experimental method of reasoning to moral subjects than Malebranche was to pursue an attempted synthesis of Augustinian and Cartesian anthropology.<sup>28</sup> As such, it would seem that Hume’s naturalism, as licensed through the ‘Title Principle’, fails to epistemically destabilise religious metaphysics at all.

One response here is to view this sorry situation as a call to improvement. To claim that Hume realised this himself, and to argue that he eventually – in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* – develops an epistemological framework on which philosophy is a justified means of pursuing truth, while superstition is not. Qu has recently argued for this position at length (Qu, 2020). Another response is to argue that if we examine Hume’s account of curiosity at the end of Book Two of the *Treatise*, we find that superstition is incapable of satisfying the passion of curiosity, whereas philosophy can, and that this provides an epistemic rationale for his preferring philosophy to superstition. This line is defended by Karl Schafer (Schafer, 2014).

I will position my reading against Schafer’s in the next section. Here, however, while I agree with Qu that Hume was ultimately unhappy with his *Treatise* epistemology, and that he later sought to show that we are better justified in holding philosophically acquired metaphysical beliefs than we are superstitious ones, I still think that Hume *correctly* believed he had epistemic grounds to prefer philosophy to superstition as he went to press with the *Treatise*. We see this once we realise that justification is not the only epistemic property that Hume thought ought to govern our epistemic preferences. This becomes clear, I think, when we consider the role that animal analogies play in Hume’s science of human nature.

### 3.2. Animal Analogies

Hume frequently appeals to animal analogies as evidence for the truth of his theories. For instance, he describes the applicability of his theory of human belief to animal beliefs as “a strong confirmation, or rather an invincible proof of my system” (T 1.3.16.8). Likewise, he asserts that the applicability of his account of human pride and humility to their animal

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<sup>28</sup> See Malebranche (1997 [1674-5]), esp. xxxiii-xliii.

analogues “must not only be allow’d to be a convincing proof of its veracity, but, I am confident, will be found an objection to every other system” (T 2.1.12.9). As we have seen, Hume also tells us to take such bold proclamations with a grain of sceptical salt (see T 1.4.7.15), but still, he obviously placed a lot of epistemic weight on animal analogies when it came to determining the likely truth of any theory of human nature. Indeed, he even calls them “a kind of touchstone, by which we may try every system in this species of philosophy” (T 1.3.16.3) i.e. in moral philosophy.

Hume’s use of animal analogies has not figured prominently in discussions of his decision to continue with philosophy at the end of Book One. This could be because Hume’s various claims that animal analogies provide support for the truth of his theories can be understood as his contending that they increase the liveliness with which his hypotheses are entertained, and therefore the extent to which they are justified. There is ample textual evidence that Hume thinks this is precisely what animal analogies do. And were their justificatory properties the only epistemic properties that Hume thought animal analogies had, then there would be no reason to consider them as any different to other analogies, or to any other form of causal reasoning, when considering Hume’s warrant for believing that his causal explanatory hypotheses are true.

Yet there is reason to think that it is not simply the liveliness enhancing quality of animal analogies that gives them epistemic purchase within Hume’s philosophy. For when Hume first introduces them into the *Treatise*, he frames his doing so in terms of the “security” that such analogies provide him, as a scientist of human nature (T 1.3.15.12). More precisely, Hume claims that rules of good reasoning are “very easy” to invent, but “extremely difficult” apply, and that this is especially so in moral philosophy (T 1.3.15.11). Interestingly, Hume does not blame this on the inconstancy of human reason, but rather on the “complication of circumstances” attending all phenomena in nature and moral phenomena in particular (T 1.3.15.11).

As such, Hume says that when we want to discover the cause of any mental phenomenon “we must carefully separate whatever is superfluous” from what “is essential to any action of the mind” (T 1.3.15.11). One does this, Hume thinks, by developing increasingly refined experiments that are explicitly designed to reveal the “decisive point” in any causal explanation (T 1.3.15.11). This iterated refinement of one’s experiments requires both the “utmost constancy” and “utmost sagacity” (T 1.3.15.11) and this is where animal analogies are especially useful. For to apply one’s hypotheses to animals is to “enlarge the sphere” of one’s “experiments”, “as far as possible” (T 1.3.15.12), thus affording one the surest available

guarantee that one has sorted the superfluous from the essential. It is for this reason, Hume says, that the applicability of his hypotheses to animals affords him the “security” that he has managed to “choose the right way amongst so many that present themselves” (T 1.3.15.11).

Such “security” is an epistemic property that is distinct from the justificatory properties of animal analogies. For although one’s discovering that an hypothesis is applicable to animals does provide evidence for believing it, this evidence is a product of the idea enlivening properties of causal reasoning in general, not animal analogies in particular. Rather, the distinctive epistemic property of animal analogies is that they provide the best available check against false reasoning in the science of human nature. This is what Hume is getting at, I think, when he writes that:

When any hypothesis ... is advanc’d to explain a mental operation, which is common to men and beast, we must apply the same hypothesis to both; and as every true hypothesis will abide by this trial, so I may venture to affirm that no false one will ever be able to endure it. (T 1.3.16.3)

As an example, Hume refers to “those systems” that suppose causal reasoning to require “such a subtilty and refinement of thought, as not only exceeds the capacity of mere animals, but even of children and the common people in our own species” (T 1.3.16.3). Here Hume’s point would seem to be that the inapplicability of such theories to children, let alone animals, reveals that a capacity for subtle and refined thought is a superfluous circumstance as regards the explanation of how causal reasoning works – because both children and animals are obviously capable of causal reasoning. Such theories are, we might say, *insecure*, insofar as we need not extend our observational data very far in order to point out where they assume a superfluous circumstance to be essential. By contrast, the applicability of any hypothesis to animals ties it to experience in the broadest possible sense, and thereby serves to ‘secure’ it, as best as can be, against such errors of reasoning.<sup>29</sup>

This said, the applicability of an hypothesis to animals is not an infallible mark of one’s having avoided taking something superfluous for something essential. Errors of judgement are always possible, even in the safest of situations. This is why Hume says that if “any

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<sup>29</sup> For a similar epistemic use of the notion of security see T 1.3.1.4-5. Here Hume asserts that geometry is less secure than arithmetic insofar as the principles of geometry are grounded upon the “general appearances” of objects, and the appearance of objects to our senses can “never afford us any security”, when forming mathematical principles (i.e. principles concerning proportions in quantity and number), given “the prodigious minuteness of which nature is susceptible”.

philosopher” were able to explain what “we call belief” using an hypothesis that is “independent of the influence of custom upon the imagination” yet “equally applicable to beasts as to the human species”, then he (Hume) will “embrace his opinion” (T 1.3.16.8). For should anyone be able to pull this off, it would reveal that Hume’s own appeal to customary associations to explain belief is a superfluous consideration. Hume was quite sure that this would not happen, but Hume was often over-confident. Still, insofar as his theory of belief does apply equally to both humans and animals, it is more secure from this fate than one that does not.

With this we can return to Hume’s return. Does Hume give any indication that he sees the applicability of his philosophy to animals as rendering his experimental science of human nature an epistemically safer, and therefore epistemically preferable, form of metaphysical enquiry than superstitious speculation? I think the answer is yes. For, having already recommended philosophy over superstition on the ground that errors in religion are more dangerous to self and society, Hume goes on to make the further recommendation that metaphysicians (“the founders of systems”) aspire to be more like those “honest gentlemen” who look “very little beyond those objects, which are every day expos’d to their senses” when they (metaphysicians) are building their systems (T 1.4.7.14).

More exactly, Hume argues that whenever hypotheses are “embrac’d merely for being specious and agreeable” then “we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience” (T 1.4.7.14). However,

were these hypotheses 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 ... For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars, a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction. (T 1.4.7.14)

These comments are interesting to read in light of the ‘Title Principle’. For it seems reasonable to think that hypotheses that are “embrac’d *merely* for being specious and agreeable” (my emphasis) are embraced *merely* because they accord with the rules of logic and the ‘Title Principle’. Mere accordance (or seeming accordance) with the rules of logic can give the shine of truth to the most preposterous hypotheses (e.g., transubstantiation), and anything that is

lively is agreeable, by Hume's lights. As such, Hume's point would seem to be that if we embrace every hypothesis that we are minimally justified in assenting to – of which sophisticated superstitious hypotheses are a good example – then metaphysical system building is an epistemically unstable activity. We need, then, some further ground for selecting between metaphysical hypotheses, if we hope to “establish a system” of such hypotheses that is capable of withstanding “the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14); such that it is believed most likely true, if not actually true, by the most exacting judges.

For his part, Hume's “only hope” is that he might give “a different turn” to philosophical speculations, so as to focus them upon “those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction”. Hume could mean many things by this, but it is natural to read him as referring back to the subtitle of the *Treatise*: “An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects” (T *Title*). More precisely, insofar as Hume's experimental moral philosophy makes it a matter of method to ensure that his hypotheses apply equally to humans and animals, then those who follow Hume can reasonably expect that they have separated what is superfluous from what is essential in the science of human nature, and are therefore on the path to truth.

He (and they) may not be right, but no-one could be more secure in their judgements: where *secure* judgements are those that are produced by methods of reasoning that cannot easily go wrong – in the spirit, at least, of contemporary notions of epistemic ‘safety’<sup>30</sup>. This is because Hume's “experimental method of reasoning” in moral philosophy, which adopts animals as the limit case for observational data, is the least likely method of reasoning to confuse the superfluous with the essential in the study of human nature, and therefore the least likely to produce falsehoods. Superstitious anthropologies, on the other hand, make superfluous considerations the norm. For when trying to explain why human nature is the way that we observe it to be, superstitious anthropologies go beyond what we see and present us “with scenes, beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (such as divine parents in other-worldly

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<sup>30</sup> To be clear, Hume is not looking to give a modal account of knowledge, as are contemporary proponents of safety conditions in epistemology. The key similarity, rather, is that the security provided by animal analogies serves as an external constraint on knowledge claims (broadly conceived, given that Hume restricts knowledge properly-so-called to demonstrations), just as the ‘safety’ of a belief is a matter of the world, not the knower, being a certain way (see here Sosa (1999)). By way of contrast, evidence (for Hume) provides an internal constraint on knowledge claims, insofar as what we are justified in believing is ultimately a matter of the liveliness of our belief, where the liveliness of a belief is a function of one's evidence. Ultimately, what is important is that one's epistemic warrant for holding a belief is not simply a matter of one's justification for doing so. It also matters that the belief is secure (as best can be) against one's treating a superfluous circumstance as an essential one in any causal explanation. And this, Hume thinks, is a matter of using the safest method.



gardens tempted by fallen angels into inheritable transgressions). In light of this, Hume has an epistemic reason to recommend his experimental moral philosophy over superstitious anthropologies. Namely, that by adopting his experimental method of reasoning we are better secured against proclaiming falsehoods than if we choose superstition.

#### **4. Curiosity and Ambition**

Is this what Hume intended his readers to understand by his modest hope to “contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge” by turning their attention towards “common practice and experience” (T 1.4.7.14)? At the very least I think Hume intended that his experimental approach to moral philosophy *could* be understood as an epistemically well-founded rejection of the metaphysics underlying superstitious anthropologies, such as what we find in the writings of Nicholas Malebranche. I am not alone in this either. Others who give naturalistic readings of the conclusion to Book One have attempted to explain how Hume might ground an epistemic preference for philosophy over superstition. My distinctive claim is that Hume understood his use of animal analogies to provide him with the epistemic security to maintain such a position.

A potential objection to this view is that it gives no important role to the passions of curiosity and ambition, which Hume himself describes as being the “origin” of his philosophy (T 1.4.7.12). Both Garrett and Schafer have taken these passions to be central to Hume’s decision to continue with philosophy precisely because our reading Hume’s philosophy as the product of an ambitious curiosity provides us with an epistemic reason to prefer his experimental moral philosophy to superstition. Garrett draws this back to a first-order reading of the ‘Title Principle’, which, following Qu, I have already given reasons to reject. Schafer, by contrast, has argued that Hume’s tracing his experimental moral philosophy back to an ambitious curiosity is meant to signal his epistemic virtue, against the epistemic viciousness of the superstitious anthropologist.

More exactly, Schafer argues that for Hume to satisfy his intellectual ambitions he must reason in a manner that is likely to satisfy the curiosity of his “epistemic community”, i.e. other moral metaphysicians.<sup>31</sup> Here Schafer asserts that, to Hume’s mind, one’s satisfying the curiosity of one’s epistemic community is a matter of producing “stable, shared beliefs about

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<sup>31</sup> Schafer (2014), 11-4.

matters of interest ... which are the product of invention and genius”<sup>32</sup>. On Schafer’s reading, Hume is able to claim that “the acceptance of his method delivers stable beliefs more effectively than the acceptance of the methods of his opponents”<sup>33</sup> because superstitious metaphysics leads to unstable idiosyncratic theories, whereas Hume’s experimental moral philosophy leads to stable shared opinions.<sup>34</sup> As such, superstitious metaphysics is incompatible with cultivating epistemic virtue, whereas practicing the experimental method of reasoning in moral philosophy is: where “[a]n intellectual trait is an epistemic virtue just in case it receives the approval of the ‘moral sense’ (on the ‘general survey’ and from the ‘general and steady point of view’) because it tends to satisfy the curiosity and ambition of the believer and those in his ‘epistemic community’ under normal conditions”<sup>35</sup>.

Schafer’s reading of Hume as a ‘virtue epistemologist’ has not found much support amongst his own epistemic peers.<sup>36</sup> I, however, am happy to allow that Hume *is* a virtue epistemologist, in Schafer’s sense. For Schafer’s most precise claim is that if we “narrow” our focus from character traits in general to “the ability [of philosophical reasoning] to satisfy our curiosity and ambition”, then “the resulting notion of how we ought to reason is much closer to our contemporary understanding of an epistemic virtue than it is to our understanding of a merely practical or moral virtue”<sup>37</sup>. I think that this is correct, within its own narrow sphere. Furthermore, I think that adopting this narrow perspective is generally in line with Hume’s concern to liberalise how we think of virtue, even if (as Qu has well observed) Hume himself does not ever seem to countenance distinctly epistemic, as opposed to moral, virtues.

My response, rather, is that if Schafer’s primary motivation for casting Hume as a virtue epistemologist is that doing so gives Hume epistemic grounds to reject superstitious metaphysics – and this seems to be the case – then my ‘epistemic security through animal analogies’ reading can be seen as achieving the same result more simply, and with a more plausible grounding in the relevant texts. Whereas Schafer’s approach requires mobilising Hume’s Book Three account of moral judgements, which Schafer himself acknowledges is

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<sup>32</sup> Schafer (2014), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Schafer (2014), 18.

<sup>34</sup> Schafer (2014), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Schafer (2014), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Qu (2019, 311-2) politely draws attention to the paucity of textual evidence for Schafer’s view that Hume countenances distinctly epistemic, as opposed to moral, virtues. In fact, even by Schafer’s own definition (quoted above), an ‘epistemic virtue’ seems to be a special case of a moral virtue, rather than a uniquely epistemic one. Ainslie (seems to) contend that Schafer conflates Hume’s preference for philosophy with his defence of reason and (seems to) hold that, in fact, philosophising is not something Hume thinks everyone in one’s ‘epistemic community’ (presumably a community of right reasoners, broadly conceived) generally considers a virtue (see here Ainslie (2015), 220 fn. 5).

<sup>37</sup> Schafer (2015), 14-15.

highly contentious,<sup>38</sup> my reading draws from Hume's present concerns in Books One and Two. Indeed, Hume's use of animal analogies is a key structural feature that systematically links Books One and Two together as a unified contribution to the science of human nature. Whereas Schafer sees Hume as prefiguring virtue epistemology, I see him as prefiguring safety conditions on knowledge claims. Hume's contemporary relevance is assured either way, so take your pick.

Let's pick my reading. What then to make of the role that curiosity and ambition play in Hume's return to philosophy? For my part, I think that the key to understanding Hume's philosophical motivations lies in the comparison he draws between the passion for philosophy and the passions for hunting and gambling: each of which, he thinks, afford us pleasure "from the same principles" (T 2.3.10.9). More exactly, Hume thinks that all three of these passions require us to believe that what we are doing is *both* useful *and* entertaining in order to be worth keeping on with. The entertainment value of philosophy, hunting, and gambling is more or less the same in each case. I will come back to this point soon, but for the most part the entertainment value of these three activities boils down to "the difficulty, the variety, and the sudden reverses of fortune" that naturally attend them (T 2.3.10.10). As to their utility, however, the situation is different.

In the case of both hunting and philosophy, Hume thinks, we must perceive there to be some sort of public utility to our actions, in order to maintain the levels of attention required to keep going (see here T 2.3.10.4-6). As Hume explains in the case of hunting: "A man of the greatest fortune, and the farthest remov'd from avarice, tho' he takes a pleasure in hunting after partridges and pheasants, feels no satisfaction in shooting crows and magpies; and that because he considers the first as fit for the table, and the other as entirely useless" (T 2.3.10.8). The same applies to philosophers. The truths that they seek must be "fit" to "table" before others in order to be worth pursuing, and this is a matter of their public utility. Indeed, that both hunting and philosophy require an underlying sense of the public utility of one's actions could well be the reason that Hume remarks (somewhat hyperbolically) that "there cannot be two passions more nearly resembling each other, than those of hunting and philosophy" (T 2.3.10.8).

By contrast, we need not have any sense of the public utility of our actions in order to find gambling enjoyable. Quite the opposite. Instead Hume clearly regards the utility we perceive in gambling to be private utility. For our "interest" when we gamble is to "gain" (T

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<sup>38</sup> Schafer (2015), 6.

2.3.10.9), and the “narrow compass” of our views even serves to heighten the pleasure (T 2.3.10.10).

Why then does Hume present the passion for gambling as a “parallel” (T 2.3.10.9) affection to the passion for philosophy? One thought here is that Hume’s comparison between philosophy and gambling was designed to support his overall theory that some notion of utility is necessary in order to render philosophy worth doing. Yet, this noted, we might also say that between hunting and gambling Hume has identified two distinct aspects of philosophical endeavour. In one sense, philosophy is like hunting, insofar as we must have some idea of the public utility of that which we search after. But in another sense, philosophising is like gambling, insofar as we have a personal stake in the success of our endeavours, namely, our intellectual reputation. This dual conception of the nature of philosophical endeavour pairs nicely with Hume’s description of his philosophical ambitions in the conclusion to Book One. In particular, where he distinguishes between his ambition “of contributing to the instruction of mankind” and that “of acquiring a name by [his] inventions and discoveries” (T 1.4.7.12). The first of these intellectual ambitions is a benevolent one. It is the ambition to guide others towards truth, so as to satisfy their curiosity. The second, however, is a self-interested ambition. It is the desire to be known as the discoverer of important philosophical truths through ingenious explanatory inventions.

If this is a good account of Hume’s conception of his intellectual ambitions, then we can go a step further. For one thing Hume notes about the passion for gambling is that there must be some element of *risk* involved, in order to keep us attentive. As he himself puts it:

the pleasure of gaming arises not from interest alone; since many leave a sure gain for this entertainment: Neither is it deriv'd from the game alone; since the same persons have no satisfaction, when they play for nothing: But proceeds from both these causes united. (T 2.3.10.9)

This is to say, in other words, that it is not simply the fact that we might profit from some game that causes us to invest our time gambling on it – weighing our chances of success, pricing our various options, etc. Rather, it is only when we believe we have something to *lose* that the game captures our attention, and we come to care intensely about the outcome – such that we might forgo a “sure gain” doing something else.

That philosophy involves risk is something that Hume was well aware of. Consider, for instance, this passage from the beginning of *Treatise* 1.4.7, where Hume writes:

I have expos'd myself to the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians; and can I wonder at the insults I must suffer? I have declar'd my disapprobation of their systems; and can I be surpriz'd, if they shou'd express a hatred of mine and of my person? When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho' such is my weakness, that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the approbation of others. Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning. (T 1.4.7.2)

This is all rather melodramatic, but the point is clear. Hume perceived there to be significant reputational risk in his publishing his philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Hume draws a very close tie between the fact that his discoveries set him against “all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians”, and his crippling dread of publishing errors and absurdities.

I submit that this is no accident. Rather, I contend that Hume saw his continuing to philosophise in the face of his sceptical doubts as his risking a reputation as an erroneous and absurd reasoner, for the chance to win philosophical fame as an educator of mankind. Moreover, I believe that Hume emerges from his sceptical crisis with the belief that publishing his philosophy is an intellectual risk worth taking, not because he can show that his experimental moral philosophy is more entitled to assent than a sophisticated superstitious anthropology, but because his experimental philosophy of human nature is the most epistemically secure form of anthropology there is.

This is how I understand Hume's cryptic claim that the origin of his philosophy consists in the fact that he “*feels*” he would “be a loser in a point of pleasure” if he sought to stifle his ambitious curiosity (T 1.4.7.12). For the sceptical Hume cannot be sure that by continuing with his experimental moral philosophy he will avoid error and absurdity. Still, insofar as he has a secure *method* for discovering anthropological truths, he feels hopeful that he can win philosophical fame as a destroyer of superstition in the science of human nature. So he rolls the dice.

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<sup>39</sup> Indeed, despite his ambition of “acquiring a name” in philosophy, Hume ultimately chose to publish the *Treatise* anonymously, a decidedly cautious approach to attaining fame in the republic of letters.

## 5. Conclusion

Having decided upon a return to philosophy, and more precisely, having decided to follow philosophy over superstition, Hume writes that:

Philosophy ... 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. (T 1.4.7.13)

What then, we might ask, of the “philosophical melancholy and delirium” (T 1.4.7.9) that Hume’s own sceptical reflections had inspired within him only moments earlier? Perhaps Hume’s sceptical despair was one of those “seldom” occasions when philosophy serves to disrupt a thinker’s natural propensities. Or perhaps Hume saw his philosophical impulses as somehow self-moderating: he does say that his “hope” of setting philosophical speculation onto the sure path of truth “serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevail upon me” (T 1.4.7.14). Whatever the case, it is clear that Hume did not think his philosophising posed the threat to public and private well-being that superstition did, for, ‘[g]enerally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous’ (T 1.4.7.13).

This said, Hume also makes clear that the dangerousness of any hypothesis – whether religious or philosophical – has no bearing on the question of its truth or falsity. As Qu has pointed out, Hume dismisses attempts to refute the doctrine of necessity on the grounds of its “dangerous consequences to religion” (T 2.3.2.3).<sup>40</sup> Instead he contends that “[w]hen any opinion leads us into absurdities, 'tis certainly false; but 'tis not certain an opinion is false, because 'tis of dangerous consequence. Such topics, therefore, ought entirely to be foreborn, as serving nothing to the discovery of truth” (T 2.3.2.3). In light of such remarks, it is best to assume that Hume did not regard his recommendation of philosophy over superstition on the grounds of superstition’s dangerousness to be an epistemic recommendation. Instead, it is a practical recommendation: superstition poses a moral threat to humanity whereas philosophy does not, at least by Hume’s lights.

On what epistemic grounds, then, might Hume recommend philosophy over superstition? Scholars generally suppose that Hume was concerned to have such grounds, and

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<sup>40</sup> Qu (2020), 156-8.

irreligious readings of Hume's *Treatise* elevate this supposition to an interpretive principle. Indeed, Hume's seeming failure to provide any epistemic grounds to prefer philosophy over superstition has been linked to the failure of naturalistic readings of *Treatise* 1.4.7.<sup>41</sup> For if Hume concludes Book One the *Treatise* without any means of asserting the epistemic superiority of his experimental science of human nature over a sophisticated lapsarian anthropology like Malebranche's, then what has he really achieved? Either we read the concluding section of Book One as expressing a highly sophisticated form of scepticism (a 'true scepticism'), as Ainslie does, or we follow Qu in saddling Hume with a half-baked epistemic naturalism, one that he later comes to see was inadequate, not least because he cannot dismiss superstition as a less justified method of reasoning towards truth than philosophy.

Happily however, Hume does have epistemic grounds to prefer his experimental moral philosophy to sophisticated superstitious anthropologies. Namely, Hume's confirmation of his hypotheses through animal analogies provides him with the best possible security against confusing explanatorily superfluous phenomena for explanatorily essential phenomena in the science of human nature. This being the case, Hume has epistemic grounds to prefer his experimentally formed hypotheses to superstitious speculations, even though the well-formed conclusions of both are entitled to our assent. Such *security* operates similarly to safety conditions on knowledge, insofar as secure methods of reasoning are more likely to issue in true beliefs than insecure ones, and are therefore more likely to produce knowledge than equally justified but less secure methods.

My interpretation of Hume's ultimate epistemic position does require that a naturalistic reading of *Treatise* 1.4.7 is available, but I have argued that Allison-style readings do the trick. Notably, neither Ainslie nor Qu give much credence to Allison-style interpretations. In Ainslie's case this is explicitly because such interpretations cannot rule out logically sound superstitious hypotheses on epistemic grounds.<sup>42</sup> My 'security through animal analogies' reading serves to rectify this problem, and it does so in a more exegetically elegant manner than Shafer's reading of Hume as a 'virtue epistemologist'. This said, it remains the case that my irreligious reading of *Treatise* 1.4.7 either stands or falls on the question of whether an Allison-style naturalistic reading of the conclusion to Book One is defensible. This will come down to the details, and the details of *Treatise* 1.4.7 leave plenty of room for disagreement. But I have weighed the risks, and I will take my chances.

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<sup>41</sup> Both Ainslie (2015) and Qu (2020) arguably forward a criticism of this sort.

<sup>42</sup> Ainslie (2015), 233 fn.35.

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