1. Hume’s Relationship to Skepticism

The core of the “Hume brand” has always been the various forms of skepticism associated with his name. And certainly Hume is a great marshaler of skeptical arguments — most notably over the course of Part 4 of Book 1 of the Treatise. There Hume considers a series of skeptical arguments which appear to threaten nearly every aspect of our epistemic lives — undermining our naive views about the senses, our belief in external bodies, the coherence of modern science, and even our trust in reason itself. Thus, it is hardly surprising that after considering these arguments Hume finds himself thrust into a state of skeptical melancholy, resolved “to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity” (T 1.4.7.1 / SBN 263–4).

But while Hume plainly takes these arguments very seriously, and despite the popular association of Hume with skepticism, his actual relationship to them is far from clear. Does he, as a result of these arguments, come to believe that these forms of ordinary belief formation lack all epistemic merit? Or does he instead find some way of escap-
KARL SCHAFER

ing their apparent force that allows him to endorse — perhaps with some modifications — our ordinary belief-forming practices?

Broadly speaking, Hume’s view was traditionally taken to be that these skeptical arguments demonstrate that there is no epistemic merit in reasoning as we do — even if it is impossible to stop reasoning in this fashion.\(^8\) We can call this the Radical Skepticism Reading. But this interpretation has been challenged in a number of different ways over the last century or so of Hume scholarship. For example, according to what we might call the No Epistemology Reading, Hume does not fall prey to radical skepticism of this sort, but only because he turns his back on the normative questions that have been one of the traditional focuses of epistemology.\(^9\) Alternatively, according to what we might call the No Resting Place Reading, Hume simply has no stable or all-things-considered attitude towards these sorts of skeptical questions —

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). As will become clear, an important element in Hume’s response to skepticism is the insistence that a way of forming beliefs may be epistemically virtuous even though no further piece of non-circular reasoning supports it.

7. In the following, I will focus on Hume’s views in the Treatise — bracketing for the most part the question of whether his views on these issues shift substantially by the time he composes the Enquiries. Still I will say a bit along the way about why I think the view I am outlining here remains central to Hume’s response to skepticism there as well.


9. It is not clear that anyone has actually advocated such a reading in an unrestricted form, but the spirit of it is plainly active in a good deal of work on Hume’s relationship to skepticism. For example, an emphasis on the naturalistic and descriptive, as opposed to the normative, aspects of Hume’s epistemology is prominent in Norman Kemp Smith’s work — for example, in his The Philosophy of David Hume (London: Macmillan, 1941). Nonetheless it is plain that Kemp Smith does not think that there are no normative dimensions to Hume’s engagement with these issues. For a view that also heavily emphasizes the descriptive, naturalistic elements in Hume’s discussion of these issues over the normative, see William Edward Morris, “Hume’s Scepticism About Reason”, Hume Studies 15.1 (1989), 39–60.

Curious Virtues in Hume’s Epistemology

... oscillating instead between a state of skeptical despair and a state of unreflective acceptance of “common sense”.\(^{10}\)

Each of these ways of reading Hume captures a certain aspect of Hume’s engagement with skepticism in Treatise 1.4. But each of them also suffers from serious problems. The Radical Skepticism Reading echoes the despair with which Hume’s discussion of the implications of his skeptical arguments in 1.4.7 begins. But it also faces several challenges — none more serious than that posed by Hume’s apparently untroubled acceptance of ordinary forms of empirical reasoning throughout the Treatise, both before and after the skeptical passages in 1.4.\(^{11}\) The No Epistemology Reading, on the other hand, rightly stresses Hume’s interest in the functioning of the human mind, naturalistically conceived.\(^{12}\) But it faces severe difficulties in accounting for passages in which Hume appears to engage in the normative evaluation of certain forms of reasoning — passages which are most common at the close of Book 1.\(^{13}\) Finally, given the manner in which Hume’s at-

10. For an example of this reading, see Robert J. Fogelin’s Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature (Boston: Routledge, 1985). As the case of Fogelin makes clear, one can endorse this last reading while also endorsing various other readings as true from some particular perspective. Thus, there are various possible combinations of these views in the literature. Similarly, the points I will be making below could be regarded by a proponent of the No Resting Place Reading as articulating the nature of one of the perspectives Hume assumes with respect to these skeptical arguments.

11. For cases in which Hume appears to endorse one way of reasoning as opposed to others, see the passages of 1.4.7 cited below, as well as the “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects”, which he describes as providing him with all the logic he needs (T 1.3.15 / SBN 173–6). Also compare his famous argument against miracles in the first Enquiry.

12. See, for example, Hume’s claim that his main intention in presenting the skeptical argument against reason in 1.4.1 was “only to make the reader sensible of the truth of his hypothesis, that all our reasoning concerning causes and effects are derive’d from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures” (T 1.4.1.8 / SBN 183–4, emphasis in text). And compare his insistence that his main concern in 1.4.2 is “the causes which induce us to believe in the existence of body” (T 1.4.2.2 / SBN 187–8, emphasis in text).

13. See again the passages noted in response to the Radical Skepticism Reading — as well as the passages that appear to support this reading.
titude towards skepticism shifts with his “mood” in 1.4.7, the No Resting Place Reading is surely very natural.\(^{14}\) And yet it faces the obvious complaint that, by the close of Book 1, Hume seems to have achieved a point of view that is sufficiently stable and reflective to allow him to continue his investigation of the human mind in the manner he does for the remainder of the Treatise.

Ingenious solutions to all of these problems abound in the literature, but given them, I believe that Hume at the close of Book 1 is best read as having reached a relatively stable perspective on the normative standing of ordinary empirical reasoning, one which involves only a limited degree of skepticism. Following Hume’s own terminology, we might call this the Mitigated Skepticism Reading.\(^{15}\)

Such a reading can be developed in a number of different ways. But there is significant evidence that Hume has come to endorse a response to skepticism of this general sort by the end of 1.4.7. For example, consider what has come to be called the “Title Principle” passage, where Hume states:\(^{16}\)

Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the 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.\(^{17}\)

On its face, the Title Principle appears to represent the articulation of a distinction between (i) the ways we ought to reason and (ii) the ways we ought not to reason — a distinction which is supposed to avoid the “dangerous dilemma” that Hume raises at 1.4.7.6–7 (SBN 267–8).\(^{18}\) And while there is considerable debate about whether the Title Principle represents Hume’s final word about these matters in 1.4.7, it is hard to escape the sense that Hume has arrived at some relatively stable distinction of this sort by the close of Book 1.\(^{19}\)

If this is correct, then at the close of Book 1 Hume arrives at a positive normative epistemology, which implies only a limited level of skepticism. Of course, in endorsing certain forms of reasoning in this way, Hume is not claiming that these forms of reasoning are justified

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\(^{14}\) See also Hume’s claim that skeptical doubt “both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady; which can never be radically cur’d, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem to be entirely free of it” (1.4.2.57 / SBN 218). But note that this claim is merely psychological, and so does not directly speak to Hume’s understanding of how we ought to respond to skepticism.

\(^{15}\) For this terminology, see EHU 12.3 / SBN 140–50.

\(^{16}\) This terminology is due to Don Garrett’s extremely helpful discussion of these issues. See in particular his Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy.

\(^{17}\) T 1.4.7.11. Compare the reference to “propensity” at the beginning of 1.4.7, where Hume writes that he “can give no reason why I shou’d assent to it [some reasoning]; and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects

\(^{18}\) In particular, as will become clearer, the Title Principle represents a way of avoiding these paradoxes because, while it endorses much of our ordinary empirical reasoning, it does not endorse, say, the reasoning that generates the paradoxes that Hume develops in 1.4.1. For more on exactly which sorts of reasoning pass the Title Principle test, see below.

\(^{19}\) For criticism of Garrett’s focus on the Title Principle, see Janet Broughton, “The Inquiry in Hume’s Treatise”, The Philosophical Review 113.4 (2004), 537–56, and the symposia on Garrett’s book in Hume Studies 24:1 (1998) and Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 62:1 (2001). Much of the debate about the Title Principle relates to its ability to account for the condemnation of superstition that follows immediately upon Hume’s statement of it (in T 1.4.7.13 / SBN 271–2). I will return below to this very important issue. In forthcoming work, Garrett has recently expanded upon his discussion of the Title Principle to argue that the force and vivacity of ideas functions as a sort of Humean “sense of probability”. So long as it is not taken too literally, this terminology seems to me quite apt. But whether or not this is an accurate way of describing Hume’s views, it seems to me that it is most plausible when paired with the account of epistemic virtue I develop below. For on Garrett’s own account, it is impossible for Hume to determine how such a “sense of probability” ought to function without appealing to a conception of “wisdom” or epistemic virtue. Thus, the very development of the “sense-based” abstract ideas of probability that Garrett describes would be impossible without an appeal to the distinction between epistemic virtue and vice I discuss below. In this way, even if Garrett is right that “probable” should be viewed as a normative “sense-based” concept, its normative status is at least partially downstream of the issues discussed below.
by further reasoning that speaks in favor of their reliability. For, as his discussion of probable reasoning makes clear, Hume believes that no further reasoning of this sort is available to us in many cases.\(^2\)\(^0\) Rather, Hume is here simply describing what he takes good reasoning to consist in — where good reasoning does not require that the reasoner be able (even in principle) to support reasoning in this way with further reasoning.

Thus, I would suggest that we take the distinction that Hume draws here, between how we ought and ought not reason, at face value. But even if we do so, this distinction alone tells us very little about the nature of his epistemology. For it at most sorts cases of reasoning into two piles — one “good”, the other “bad” — while telling us very little about why these cases are sorted in this way.

Unfortunately, Hume’s discussion immediately following the Title Principle passage is not obviously very helpful here. For he moves very quickly from this passage to a discussion of curiosity and ambition, a “strong propensity” to do so.\(^2\)\(^0\)

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The interpretation outlined so far has a number of recent proponents.\(^2\)\(^1\) But even among those attracted to it, there is no consensus about why Hume accepts a distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning of this sort.

Still, if I am not mistaken, the most popular such account involves what we might call the Practical Reading.\(^2\)\(^2\) On this way of developing the Mitigated Skepticism Reading, Hume accepts a distinction between “good” and “bad” forms of reasoning for reasons that are ultimately merely practical — as opposed to epistemic — in character.\(^2\)\(^3\) Or, in other words, he accepts that we ought to reason in this manner because doing so survives reflection from a practical point of view. As generally developed, the Practical Reading accepts that all reasoning should be negatively evaluated from a purely epistemic point of view. This, the proponent of this interpretation claims, is what Hume means

\(^{20}\) See again his distinction (in T 1.4.7.3 / SBN 265) between being able to supply further reasons for believing and reasoning as he does and simply feeling a “strong propensity” to do so.

\(^{21}\) In addition to Garrett, a somewhat different way of developing the Mitigated Skepticism Reading can be extracted from (the non-skeptical aspects of) Louis E. Loeb’s important Stability and Justification in Hume’s Treatise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). I return to the relationship between my view and Loeb’s towards the end of this essay. Other important forms of the Mitigated Skepticism Reading read Hume as a reliabilist or in terms of the contemporary notion of proper functioning. For the first, see, e.g., Michael L. Costa, “Hume and Justified Belief”, Canadian Journal of Philosophy 11:2 (1981), 219–228, and Frederic F. Schmitt, Knowledge and Belief (Oxford: Routledge, 1992). For some (critical) discussion of the second, see Kevin Meeker’s “Was Hume a Proper Functionalist?”, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 72:1 (2006): 120–136. I discuss both of these alternatives below.


\(^{23}\) For now I will simply rely on the reader’s intuitive understanding of the distinction between practical and epistemic evaluation. As we will see, for Hume the distinction between these two forms of evaluation is not at all strict.
when he says that the understanding, when reflecting on itself, “entirely subverts itself”.24 Instead, according to the Practical Reading, we can locate a perspective from which we can positively evaluate certain forms of reasoning only when we turn from a strictly epistemic perspective to one that focuses on our practical aims.

As such, it is not the case that this line of interpretation does away with any distinction between epistemic and practical evaluation. Rather, it respects this distinction but takes Hume’s positive evaluation of certain ways of reasoning to be made from a practical — as opposed to an epistemic — perspective. If so, then when Hume accepts a distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning, he does so because it describes the sorts of reasoning that he endorses when he considers the matter with his practical interests and aims in mind.

This way of reading Hume gains an important source of support from the sorts of considerations that Hume appeals to in his defense of a distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning at the close of Book 1. For example, Hume’s defense of this distinction emphasizes the immediate pleasure he receives from reasoning in certain ways. So he notes that inclinations to reason about matters of a more philosophical sort “spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou’d I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I feel I shou’d be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy” (T 1.4.7.12 / SBN 270–1). And isn’t the fact that reasoning of a certain sort would bring one pleasure a practical consideration in favor of reasoning in this way?

Similarly, when Hume compares his account of how we ought to reason with an account of how we ought to form beliefs that relies on religion and “superstition”, he notes that mistakes in philosophy are “merely ridiculous”, whereas similar mistakes in religion are often extremely “dangerous” (T 1.4.7.13 / SBN 271–2). Here Hume seems to be thinking of the (for him) recent history of European religious wars.25 And while we today — in the wake of our experience of very dangerous “mistakes in philosophy” — might dispute Hume’s empirical point, this discussion also seems to involve the practical comparison of these two ways of forming beliefs.

There are, then, powerful prima facie reasons for reading Hume in this way. And this line of interpretation only gains strength when we consider how to flesh out the thought that Hume is engaged in a practical evaluation of different methods of belief formation at the end of Book 1. For given the detailed account of moral evaluation that he provides later on in the Treatise, and given the role that utility, pleasure, and pain play in such evaluation, it is natural to think that the sort of practical evaluation that may be at work in 1.4.7 will be very closely related to evaluation of the former sort.26

If so, a coherent picture of the close of Book 1 quickly emerges. For Hume, moral evaluation is first and foremost a matter of the evaluation

24. T 1.4.7.7 / SBN 267–8. Compare Hume’s claim that the only question remaining before us at 1.4.7.6 is “how far we ought to yield to these illusions” (e.g., the illusions involved in the common-sense picture of causally related external bodies). Here Hume is plainly giving voice to something like the main thought behind the Practical Reading, but it is crucial that he is still speaking from the perspective of “skeptical melancholy” at this moment. Thus, I do not believe this represents his considered view about these issues.

25. An anonymous referee suggests that Hume may actually be thinking of his own personal experience of theocracy in 18th-century Scotland, which also seems quite possible. Of course, it is also possible that he has both of these cases of “danger” in mind.

26. For a detailed argument for this reading of Hume, see Michael Ridge’s excellent “Epistemology Moralized”. Note that there was a gap of almost two years between the publication of the first two Books of the Treatise and the publication of the third — a period during which it is clear that Hume revised his views about the origins of morals to some degree (partly in response to Hutcheson’s comments on a draft of Book 3). Nonetheless it remains plausible that Hume had already developed most of the basic elements of his view of moral evaluation by the time of the publication of Books 1 and 2. Thus, on balance, these facts seem, if anything, to support the Practical Reading. For they help to explain why Hume does not explicitly couch the discussion of 1.4.7 in the terms of his later discussion of moral evaluation, as one might expect him to have done if this interpretation were correct.
of character traits as virtuous or vicious. And a character trait will count as a virtue, according to Hume’s account, just in case it secures a positive response from the Humean “moral sense” when considered from a particular perspective. More precisely, for Hume, proper moral approval or disapproval arises when we survey a person’s character from what Hume calls “the steady and general point of view” and allow our sympathy with that person and those around him to determine our response to this character. The second of these elements is crucial in part because it explains why the special sort of approval that is characteristic of the Humean “moral sense” is distinct from more self-interested forms of affection. And the first of them is crucial because it provides Hume with an account of how we come to “correct” our moral sentiments so as to arrive at a set of shared views about matters of virtue and vice that is sufficiently stable to support the meaningful use of moral language.

Thus, both of these elements play an essential role in Hume’s account. Unfortunately, their precise relationship is the subject of considerable dispute. But the details of Hume’s account will not matter much for the discussion to follow. Rather, all that matters here are the general outlines of this account and, in particular, the idea that moral evaluation involves the responses of the “moral sense” when these are made from the “common” or “general and steady point of view”.

In any case, what matters most for present purposes are the sorts of traits that win the approval of a properly functioning “moral sense” — the most significant of which are traits of the following four sorts:

1. The trait is immediately agreeable to its possessor.
2. It is immediately agreeable to others in the narrow circle of its possessor.
3. It is useful to its possessor.
4. It is useful to others in the same narrow circle.


31. An additional element of Hume’s account is his response to the “virtue in rags” problem. I’ll briefly come back to this issue in an epistemic context below, but for the most part I will leave the interpretative disputes about this issue to the side here.

32. For Hume, a person’s “narrow circle” is largely composed of those with whom they are in relatively close causal contact — e.g., their family, friends, and associates. The significance of this “circle” for moral evaluation is in part the product of our natural tendency, when sympathizing with a person, to also sympathize with those that we associate with them. But its precise significance for Humean moral evaluation is the product of the manner in which Hume conceives of the “general and steady point of view” that determines the nature of “correct” moral evaluation — for a central element in this “point of view” is a specification of which individuals we should sympathize with when considering whether someone is virtuous or vicious. Thus, while the very nature of the Humean “moral sense” leads our moral evaluations to be responsive to individuals other than the person we are evaluating to some degree, it is the “general and steady point of view” that fixes our sympathetic attention on a particular group of individuals as relevant to such evaluations. (See, in particular, T 3.3.3.2 / SBN 602–3.)

33. See, e.g., T 3.3.1.28–31 (SBN 590–1). Note that this way of characterizing moral virtue is much more prominent in Hume’s later work, but some version of it is plainly operative in all of his work on these issues from the time of the Treatise on.
Thus, if Hume is morally evaluating different forms of reasoning at the close of Book 1, we should expect him to appeal to these four kinds of considerations. And strikingly this is exactly what he appears to do. We have already seen that he appeals to the manner in which reasoning in certain ways is a source of immediate pleasure for the reasoner. And he also appeals to the “dangerous” consequences that certain forms of reasoning can have for others. Moreover, it is not difficult to locate the other two sorts of consideration in his discussion. For example, he stresses the fact that “no one will hearken to” him when he is in the grips of his skeptical melancholy — a plain reference to the immediately disagreeable nature of this state for others (T 1.4.7.1/ SBN 263–4). And he discusses the “uselessness” of this state for himself, at least insofar as this relates to his ability to solve problems of a theoretical sort. Thus, Hume’s discussion of the proper response to skepticism appeals to all of the varieties of consideration one would expect him to emphasize if he were evaluating this question from a moral point of view.

Moreover, thinking of Hume’s account of how one ought to reason in this manner lends a pleasing unity to his account of how we ought to reason and his account of how we ought to act or be more generally. For if this reading is correct, then the distinction between “good” and “bad” forms of reasoning is just a particular instance of the general moral distinction between virtuous and vicious character traits. In other words, on this interpretation, at the close of Book 1 Hume is making tacit use of a virtue-theoretical account of how one ought to reason — one that is simply a particular application of his general account of moral virtue.

This fits very well with Hume’s later discussion of the intellectual virtues in Treatise 3.3.4. There Hume argues that the narrowly moral virtues, such as justice or benevolence, fall under the same general class as natural talents and abilities, including intellectual abilities (or disabilities) such as “sense and knowledge”, “want of understanding”, “good sense and judgment”, “a moderate share ... of parts and understanding”, “good sense and genius”, “superiority of reason”, and “a quick or a slow apprehension”. Thus, if we think of the close of Book 1 as concerned with how an intellectually virtuous individual reasons, we should expect these virtues to be grounded in the same sort of evaluation that grounds Hume’s account of the naturally moral virtues.

In short, then, on this interpretation, Hume’s distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning simply describes how a morally virtuous person forms beliefs. As should be obvious, I find a great deal attractive about this way of reading Hume. In particular, in reflecting on the merits of various forms of reasoning in these sections, Hume does seem to be engaging in a form of evaluation that is very similar to what he will later describe in his discussion of moral evaluation. Most importantly, the conclusions he reaches at the close of Book 1 are rooted in the manner in which his passions and sentiments respond to his earlier skeptical “discoveries”. Thus, much as in the case of moral evaluation, the sort of evaluation Hume is engaged in here involves considering which forms of reasoning elicit a positive response from our passions and sentiments. And, much as in the moral case, Hume appears to be considering this question here from a perspective that abstracts away from some of the potentially distorting effects of personal bias and the like — i.e., from something like the “general and steady point of view”.

In this way, there is a clear structural parallel between the sort of evaluation Hume is engaged in at the close of Book 1 and the form of moral evaluation he describes in Book 3. And given this structural parallel, it is not surprising that Hume appeals to the four varieties of consideration noted above: namely, features of some way of reasoning that garner an immediate positive response from the reasoner’s passions (and the passions of those around her) and considerations that indirectly garner a positive response from the reasoner’s passions (and

34. Once again compare Ridge’s very helpful discussion of these issues.

35. Again, given the gap between the publication of Books 1 and 2 and Book 3, we should not expect these parallels to be complete in every respect.
the passions of those around her) through their consequences. But despite this, there are also reasons to wonder whether the best way to understand the sort of evaluation Hume is engaged in at this stage of the *Treatise* is to view it as a species of purely practical evaluation in the manner the Practical Reading does.\(^{36}\)

There are two main reasons for my hesitancy about this question.\(^{37}\) First, as noted above, while this reading of Hume allows him to find a purely practical justification for reasoning in the manner he endorses, it does not allow him to claim any sort of epistemic justification for reasoning in this way. Thus, on this reading, Hume remains an epistemic skeptic — something that seems to me to sit poorly with the manner in which he endorses the forms of reasoning he uses in his work. Throughout Book 1 of the *Treatise* and beyond, Hume specifies a variety of rules and principles for good reasoning — including the Title Principle itself.\(^{38}\) And in endorsing these principles, he does not indicate that he means to endorse them merely from a practical point of view. Quite on the contrary, while Hume does qualify his endorsement of these principles in various ways, he never indicates that this endorsement is not meant to be an endorsement of them on broadly epistemic grounds. In other words, while Hume is a mitigated skeptic, his mitigated skepticism seems to relate to the epistemic status of the ways of reasoning he endorses, and not merely to their practical status. Or, as he says elsewhere, when considering the nature of causal inference in the first *Enquiry*, those who argue that his researches have no practical purpose...

36. It is often suggested that a purely moral reading of Hume’s claims at the close of Book 1 invites the charge of circularity against him. But this is a complicated issue, so I postpone discussion of it for the moment. For further discussion of it in the context of the Practical Reading, see Ridge’s “Epistemology Moralized”.

37. In addition to the exegetical reasons I will discuss here, the Practical Reading of Hume seems to me unattractive on purely philosophical grounds. But discussion of this would take us too far afield.

38. See again the rules specified in T 1.3.15, and in particular the manner in which these rules are endorsed there...

... mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the point; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference. (EHU 4.21 / SBN 36–8)

Second, this way of reading Hume makes it difficult to explain the discontinuities between his evaluation of forms of reasoning at the close of Book 1 and his discussion of moral evaluation in Book 3. In particular, while his evaluation of the different responses to skepticism and his conception of moral evaluation share the structural similarities noted above, these two forms of evaluation focus on quite different passions or sentiments. In considering how he should respond to skepticism, Hume generally focuses on a quite narrow range of passions — namely, the more “intellectual” passions of curiosity or “the love of truth” and ambition:

At the time, therefore, that I am tir’d with amusement and company, and have indulg’d a reverie in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally inclin’d to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation. I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform’d; decide concerning truth and falshood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concern’d for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou’d I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any
other business or diversion, I feel I should be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy (T 1.4.7.12 / SBN 270–1, emphasis in text).

As the italicized references to "inclination" and "feeling" indicate, this passage is meant to explicate the inclinations and propensities that the Title Principle passage makes reference to.39 And when we read the passage in this manner, we can see Hume here identifies two passions as relevant in this way: curiosity and ambition.40 This is problematic for the interpretation under discussion, because these passions play a very minor role in Hume’s discussion of the moral virtues — especially when compared with all the other ways in which our character traits may be associated with much more powerful and direct forms of pleasure and pain. Thus, there is a discontinuity between the passions that are the focus of Hume’s discussion at the close of Book 1 and those that dominate his discussion of moral evaluation.

These discontinuities are only confirmed by careful consideration of the one place in which Hume seems to deviate from them: his discussion of the “dangers” associated with religion and superstition. For when Hume discusses this, he explicitly characterizes it as a consideration he is citing only because, even without curiosity and ambition, he would still find himself drawn into speculation as a result of “weakness” (T 1.4.7.13 / SBN 271–2). Thus, it is the passions of curiosity and ambition that are the focus of his primary reflections here. And the dangerousness of religion and superstition is cited only as a supplement to this main line of thought. Of course, in citing these considerations,

39. Of course, the Title Principle passage also insists that one ought to engage in reasoning only on “sceptical principles”. But this does not mean that these skeptical principles (on their own) provide the inclination to reason that the Title Principle refers to. Rather, as Hume is imagining things here, once we have accepted the relevant “sceptical principles”, we will engage in reasoning just in case we have been prompted to do so by some passion or sentiment.

40. Similarly, when Hume recommends a “sceptical solution” to his difficulties in the first Enquiry, he writes that a “sceptical” approach to philosophy “mortifies” every passion but “the love of truth; and that passion never is, nor can be carried to too high a degree.” (EHU 5.1 / SBN 40–1)

Hume is evaluating different forms of reasoning practically. But much like his discussion of the “interested obligation” to be virtuous in the moral case, his argument that we all have an “interested obligation” to prefer philosophy to “superstition” is best understood as a supplement to his main line of argument — an argument which focuses on the manner in which certain forms of reasoning satisfy our curiosity and ambition.

This sits awkwardly with the Practical Reading of what Hume is up to. For if Hume were engaged in the purely practical evaluation of different possible responses to skepticism at this point, the dangers associated with the different possible responses would be the first thing he would want to consider.41 And while such considerations are not wholly absent from Hume’s discussion here, they do not dominate it in the manner the Practical Reading suggests they should. Thus, there is a significant disanalogy between the considerations that loom large at the close of Book 1 and the considerations that loom large in Humean moral evaluation — something that should give us pause about tying.

41. Against this point, and following Ridge’s discussion of these issues, we might insist that Hume de-emphasizes the dangerous consequences of certain forms of reasoning here because appealing to them in the context of his debate with the proponent of religion would be question-begging. For instance, one might insist that it is true that philosophy is less “dangerous” in its consequences than religion only if we limit ourselves to the consequences of philosophy and religion in the present life — as opposed to the life to come. And yet this does not seem to be what is motivating Hume at this moment in the text. To my mind, this is not at all surprising, since I am doubtful whether Hume would be worried about “begging the question” against the proponent of religion in this sense. Moreover, even if he were concerned with this, the same concerns would arise with respect to any moral or practical evaluation of different forms of reasoning. After all, suppose we — following Ridge — focus only on the immediate pleasure and pain that our beliefs bring us — i.e., the first of the considerations that are relevant to Humean moral evaluation. Even in this case, the proponent of religion would be in a position to insist that his set of beliefs is the source of a greater degree of immediate pleasure than the beliefs of the philosopher; once we take into account both our current existence on earth and the life to come. For isn’t one of the great pleasures of heaven the immediate pleasure that our faith in God gives us there? If so, then none of the forms of practical evaluation associated with the moral sense escape the worries about circularity that Ridge cites in this regard.
them too closely together.\footnote{Similarly, in the first \textit{Enquiry}, although Hume does complain that no “durable good” can ever come of excessive skepticism, he immediately makes it clear that his first concern in this context is that such skepticism will never produce any “constant and durable” conviction or belief (EHU 12.23). The practical consequences of this, which he goes on to mention, appear to be of secondary importance to this primary weakness of excessive skepticism. As we see in a moment, this first negative evaluation of skepticism as producing no stable and durable conviction is closely connected to the distinctive form of epistemic evaluation involved at the close of Book 1 of the \textit{Treatise}. So although the Title Principle \textit{per se} does not play a role in Hume’s discussion in the first \textit{Enquiry}, the considerations I will discuss next still lie at the center of his response to skepticism there as well.}{42}

3. \textbf{Epistemic Virtue and the Intellectual Passions}

For these reasons, we should hesitate before taking Hume’s distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning to be based on purely practical considerations. Rather, there are good textual and philosophical reasons for thinking that this distinction is based, at least in part, on some form of epistemic evaluation. The question is how to make sense of this sort of evaluation while also doing justice both to the parallels between Hume’s account of moral virtue and his discussion of how we ought to reason and to his later insistence that the intellectual virtues and the narrowly moral virtues should be treated in the same general way.

The key to understanding how this is possible begins with the observation that Hume’s conception of “moral evaluation” is extremely broad.\footnote{See again the discussion of T 3.3.4.}{43} In particular, as we will see, there are contexts in which the sort of evaluation Hume describes in Book 3 of the \textit{Treatise} is primarily (if not entirely) focused on the evaluation of character traits from what is naturally regarded as an epistemic, as opposed to a practical, point of view. For once we recognize this, we can agree with the Practical Reading that Hume’s account of how we ought to reason shares a common foundation with his discussion of purely practical or narrowly moral virtues, while also insisting that the evaluations he makes

at the close of Book 1 are partially, and in fact primarily, epistemic ones.\footnote{That having been said, Hume’s account of moral evaluation makes it difficult to draw any strict or absolute line between the epistemic evaluation of some intellectual character trait and the practical evaluation of it. But nonetheless it is possible to locate within the relevant passages of the \textit{Treatise} a form of Humean moral evaluation that is primarily concerned with considerations of a broadly epistemic sort.}{44}

To understand how this is possible, we need to reconsider the sort of evaluation that Hume is engaged in during 1.4.7. In doing so, we should continue to affirm what is correct about the Practical Reading — namely, that Hume is here engaged in the evaluation of ways of reasoning as virtuous or vicious in his \textit{very broad} sense of these terms. But at the same time, we need to reconsider what this implies — taking care to focus on the possibility that in the context of 1.4.7 this evaluation is primarily epistemic as opposed to practical in character. By doing so, I want to suggest, we can locate something like a notion of “epistemic virtue” at work in Hume’s discussion of these issues.

In considering these issues, it is helpful to begin by reconsidering what the Title Principle recommends. According to this principle, we ought to reason only when this reasoning is “lively” and mixes with “some propensity”. Plainly this will be true only insofar as we have some sort of propensity towards the formation of a vivacious belief. But what sort of “propensity” is at issue here? In Book 1 of the \textit{Treatise} Hume uses the terms “propensity” and “inclination” to refer to a wide variety of dispositions or tendencies of the mind.\footnote{See, for example: “that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant” (T 1.3.14.21 / SBN 169) and “we have a propensity to reign the continu’d existence of all sensible objects; and as this propensity arises from some lively impressions of the memory...” (T 1.4.2.42 / SBN 208–9). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to be clearer about this issue.}{45} But as the prior sentence makes clear, what is at issue in the Title Principle are propensities to form beliefs that arise “from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves” with philosophical questions “upon sceptical principles”. And as Hume immediately goes on to explain,
when he is “naturally inclined” in this way, this is because he “cannot forbear having a curiosity” about certain matters — a curiosity that is closely tied to his sense of intellectual ambition.

Thus, it is these two passions that are the primary source of the inclinations Hume is referring to here. It is possible for them to play this role because when some piece of reasoning engages a Humean passion, the ideas that arise for this reasoning are themselves enlivened. When we are curious about some matter, we feel a propensity to reason about this matter and, by so reasoning, arrive at conclusions that are more vivacious than they would otherwise be.

The central role of these passions in this context is indicated by Hume’s later discussion of them. In particular, as Hume says in the final section of Book 2, it is these passions — and curiosity in particular — that represent “the first source of all our enquiries”. Given that Books 1 and 2, but not Book 3, were published together, it is hard to believe that Hume did not intend his remarks about curiosity at the close of Book 2 to echo the manner in which Hume is lifted out of his state of “spleen and indolence” into a renewed commitment to philosophy at the close of Book 1. Thus the structure of Book 2 offers a further piece of evidence in favor of the reading being developed here.

If this is right, then in 1.4.7 Hume is recommending that we engage in reasoning only insofar as we have a propensity to engage in this reasoning — a propensity which is based at least primarily in these two passions. Or better, he is recommending that we engage in reasoning only insofar as it will satisfy the passions that generate the relevant propensity. For, as Hume’s own reasoning in 1.4.1 makes clear, curiosity can prompt us to engage in reasoning that produces a state of mind that is extremely unsatisfying to our curiosity. Thus, like any passion, the passions of curiosity and ambition can dispose us to behave in ways that do not gain our approval when we consider the question of what would satisfy them. And when this is the case, we are well advised to disregard the passions in question. Thus, on this reading, Hume is recommending that we engage in reasoning only insofar as it will tend to satisfy our curiosity and intellectual ambition. In this sense, Hume’s famous assertion that reason is and ought to be “the slave of the passions” applies just as much in the theoretical sphere as it does in the practical.

To explain exactly what this involves, it will be helpful to say a bit more about the connection between curiosity and ambition. For indeed these passions are very closely connected for Hume. In particular, a way of reasoning will satisfy our intellectual ambition only insofar as it satisfies the curiosity of those whose reactions to our views are the object of our concern. Thus, in focusing on these two passions, Hume is in effect recommending that we engage in reasoning just in case this reasoning satisfies our curiosity and the curiosity of those that we regard as members of our “epistemic community” or our “intellectual circle”.

For reasons that will become clearer, the epistemic community that is relevant here is just an individual’s “narrow circle” in Hume’s sense, when one’s sympathetic concern is focused on the passions of curiosity

46. For the enlivening role of passions see, e.g., T 1.3.13.10 / SBN 148–9.
47. Compare Hume’s discussion of probable reasoning in 1.3.18.15 / SBN 105–6.
48. T 2.3.10.1 / SBN 448.
49. T 1.4.7.9–11 / SBN 269–70.
50. T 1.4.7.11–15 / SBN 270–4. For an important expression of this idea, to which I am much indebted, see the final chapter of Annette C. Baier’s A Progress of Sentiments (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). But note that Baier’s understanding of the roots of Hume’s epistemology in reflective self-endorsement are quite different from those developed here.
51. The idea that what matters here are the propensities that win our approval when we critically reflect upon these matters is alluded to by Hume when he goes on to claim that we might at least “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” (T 1.4.7.14 / SBN 272–3).
52. For more on this connection, see my “Hume and Practical Reason”, forthcoming in The Oxford Handbook of David Hume, ed. Paul Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Note the contrast here with Kemp Smith’s way of applying this idea to the theoretical sphere in terms of the significance of our “natural beliefs”.

PHILOSOPHERS’ IMPRINT - 11 - VOL. 14, NO. 1 (JANUARY 2014)
and ambition. Thus, the bounds of this community will not be determined by those to whom one is in close physical proximity. Rather, what is crucial in both cases are the passionate connections between people. My parents and other loved ones are part of my narrow circle no matter where they call home. And a scholar whom I greatly respect will be part of my epistemic community, even if he lives across the Channel.

Given this, the Title Principle approves of some way of reasoning just in case it satisfies at least one of the following four criteria:

1. It immediately satisfies the curiosity of the reasoner.
2. It immediately satisfies the curiosity of others in the reasoner’s “epistemic community”.
3. It indirectly satisfies the curiosity of the reasoner.
4. It indirectly satisfies the curiosity of others in the reasoner’s “epistemic community”.

Crucially, these recommendations will not be the same for every individual. For instance, this will recommend that persons with a strong natural sense of curiosity, like Hume, attempt to satisfy this curiosity via a moderate level of philosophical engagement and argument. Indeed, these individuals’ sense of curiosity will often be best satisfied by the consideration of skeptical arguments, at least up to a point.

But it will not demand the same of individuals who lack such inclinations. Rather, in this case, it will recommend a less reflective attitude towards the questions of life. Thus, we find Hume writing the following:

If the reader finds himself in the same easy disposition, let him follow me in my future speculations. If not, let him follow his inclination, and wait the returns of application and good humour. The conduct of a man who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one who, feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so overwhelmed with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it. (T 1.4.7.15 / SBN 273–4)

In this way, Hume’s recommendation is that our reasoning be guided by our own curiosity and ambition, whatever form these take, so long as these passions do not lead us to engage in reasoning that is unlikely to satisfy them. Thus, while the considerations behind the Title Principle apply equally to individuals of all sorts, the recommendations that follow from these considerations will vary a good deal from case to case. In this way, there is a substantial element of “subject-sensitivity” built into Hume’s understanding of how we ought to reason.

This may seem to raise familiar worries about whether the Title Principle generates the recommendations Hume seems to think it does. For won’t some individuals feel compelled by their sense of curiosity to investigate precisely those questions that lead one down the path that
Hume follows in the earlier sections of 1.4? And, even worse, doesn’t religious “superstition” provide the advocates of extreme religion with a way of satisfying their curiosity that is at least as effective as Hume’s own philosophy? If so, shouldn’t Hume endorse both abstract “metaphysical” reasoning of a problematic sort and religious superstition, at least with respect to certain individuals? And isn’t this contrary to Hume’s recommendation of his moderately skeptical form of philosophy over these alternatives for people of all sorts?

 Fortunately, once we consider the results of Hume’s inquiry into the psychology of belief formation, neither of these results follows — at least for psychologically normal individuals. For while one’s sense of curiosity may push one to reason one’s way to the skeptical paradoxes that worry Hume, reflection on the nature of this reasoning and the limits of the human mind make it clear that these pieces of reasoning could never lead to a durable satisfaction of this passion. This is the crux of Hume’s resolution of the aforementioned “dangerous dilemma”. For Hume, we should neither reject nor accept all instances of causal reasoning across the board, but rather should engage in such reasoning only insofar as it is likely to satisfy our passions of curiosity and ambition. This is possible, according to Hume, because it is perfectly possible for the local acceptance of a variety of causal reasoning to produce curiosity-satisfying beliefs even though the systematic acceptance of this sort of reasoning in general would destroy all belief and, as a result, frustrate our sense of curiosity completely.57

 Similarly, while religious superstition may appear to be an effective means of satisfying curiosity, at least for someone with Hume’s powerful sense of curiosity, this is merely an appearance — one that will be dispelled once we consider the limits of our ability to arrive at a belief in God that is both stable and contentful enough to be satisfying to us.58 In particular, while the vague and (for Hume) somewhat self-contradictory common understanding of God may satisfy the curiosity of ordinary individuals, it will not satisfy someone like Hume.59 Indeed, as Hume notes in the first Enquiry, for such individuals, the development of religious belief beyond the certain very modest limits is as likely to excite curiosity as satisfy it:

 The religious philosophers, not satisfied with the tradition of your forefathers, and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce), indulge a rash curiosity, in trying how far they can establish religion upon the principles of reason; and they thereby excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrutinious enquiry. (EHU 11.10 / SBN 135)

 In addition, remember that the stability that is relevant here is one that is shared by the members of an individual’s epistemic community. Thus, it cannot be based on purely idiosyncratic features of one’s psychology. Rather, it must be based in psychological traits that are common to all the members of one’s epistemic community, something which plainly makes it difficult for mere dogmatism to satisfy the curiosity of someone who conceives of the relevant epistemic community in quite broad

57. It is important to remember that effectively responding to the “dangerous dilemma” does not require that we do so from within a context in which the status of ordinary causal reasoning has been fully undermined. Rather, the “dilemma” arises precisely because we are considering how to reject the conclusions of certain skeptical arguments without also rejecting all forms of causal reasoning. Thus, in order to respond to this challenge, we need to explain the normatively significant distinction between these cases. But in providing this explanation, we need not imagine that we are in a context in which the rules of normal causal reasoning have been suspended. For to do so would be to accept the conclusion of these skeptical arguments — which is just what we are trying to avoid.

58. Compare the discussion in Part XII of the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935). I discuss the connection between stability and curiosity in detail below. In addition to this issue, there is the conflict that Hume sees between developing an epistemically satisfying conception of God and developing a conception of God that satisfies the passions of fear and hope that also prompt us to consider the nature of God.

59. See again the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. As the discussion there makes plain, while traditional religious beliefs may be inconsistent, the very minimal (and so unsatisfying) conception of God favored by the deist hardly does much better on this score.
and “cosmopolitan” terms, as Hume does.

But what of individuals who lack Hume’s strong sense of curiosity? Even in such individuals, religious beliefs will generate stable, curiosity-satisfying beliefs only insofar as they do not come into obvious conflict with each other or common beliefs about the world. Thus, an ordinary individual’s curiosity will be better satisfied by religious beliefs that avoid wild or counter-intuitive claims about the world or God. In this way, even the less curious will not be well satisfied by the excesses of wild superstition that Hume wishes to condemn. Of course, by these lights, more modest forms of religious belief may remain acceptable for such individuals. But this does not seem to run counter to Hume’s intentions in these passages, whose real target is “religious superstition” as a radical alternative to empirical methods of belief formation — and not all forms of religious belief simply as such.

Thus, according to Hume, neither bold metaphysical reasoning nor wild superstition is an effective means of satisfying one’s curiosity — at least when compared with Hume’s more modest suggestions. The ability to draw distinctions like those we have just been drawing represents an advantage of this reading of the Title Principle over readings which take it to refer to any and all “propensities” to reason or form beliefs. Such readings have difficulty explaining why Hume regards some such “propensities” more favorably than others. The reading on offer here, on the other hand, has a great deal to say about this issue. Of course, what it has to say is based on empirical claims about the human mind, and one might wonder whether there could be individuals — or even groups thereof — who can satisfy their curiosity completely through a slavish devotion to the wildest pieces of religious superstition. But, so long as we are not dealing with individuals who are truly insane, there appears to be a limit to how successful such strategies may be — especially when we turn from considering individuals in isolation to considering communities of them.

These comments also help to explain why the Title Principle is a normative — as opposed to merely descriptive — principle. For while its recommendations do depend upon one’s passionate makeup, it is perfectly possible to reason in a manner that does not conform to them. After all, as the example of Hume’s own reasoning in 1.4.1 makes clear, it is easy to be prompted by one’s curiosity to reason in ways that will frustrate this very passion. Thus, although these recommendations are to some degree relativized to the reasoner’s passionate make-up, the Title Principle nonetheless articulates a genuine standard for reasoning that the reasoner can fail to meet.

With all this mind, it is time to return to the analogy between moral virtue and Hume’s epistemic recommendations. Clearly, the account being developed here preserves a very strong analogy between these cases. For just as the “moral sense” approves of some trait whenever it is directly or indirectly agreeable to the possessor and those in his narrow circle, the Title Principle approves of some way of reasoning whenever it directly or indirectly satisfies the curiosity of the reasoner and those in her epistemic community. So we can see the Title Principle (and the discussion that follows on it) as describing a special form of Humean virtue: namely, the sort of virtue that comes into view when the passions of curiosity and ambition largely determine our evaluation of a character trait as virtuous or vicious.

Of course, it is precisely these passions that are the focus of Hume’s reflections at the close of Book 1. This is crucial, because once we turn from a focus on the general agreeableness of a character trait to a narrow focus on its ability to satisfy our curiosity and ambition, the

61. In general, the question of how Hume’s account of virtue would respond to communities that are radically different from us is an interesting one, although sadly there is no space to explore it here.

62. In this regard, the recommendations of the Title Principle are once again akin to the sort of moral virtue that Hume recommends — for Hume’s understanding of moral virtue is also sensitive to what will be agreeable and useful to those in the individual in question’s “narrow circle”; although not in a manner that robs virtue of all normative significance.
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. Thus, if we restrict our attention to these two passions, we arrive at a form of epistemic virtue that is a particular manifestation of Hume’s understanding of virtue in general:

**Epistemic Virtue:** An 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.

This is just Hume’s general account of “moral” evaluation, in his very broad sense of the term, when it is restricted so as to focus on a trait’s ability to satisfy the two passions we have been discussing. Thus, in conceiving of how we ought to reason in this manner, we are simply applying Hume’s account of the virtues so as to focus on the passions that dominate the discussion at the close of Book 1.

To avoid confusion, it is important to distinguish this account from accounts of these issues, like Baier’s and Korsgaard’s, that focus on “reflective endorsement”. On such views, the normative status of a faculty depends on whether that faculty can win its own approval when it reflects upon itself. On the present view, on the other hand, what is crucial is not this, but rather whether a reliance on some faculty can win the approval of the “moral sense” when it is restricted in the manner suggested above. Thus, while a sort of passionate “reflection” is relevant here, it is very different from what Baier and Korsgaard have in mind. Of course, if some form of reasoning is immediately self-undermining, it will be unlikely to satisfy our curiosity and ambition. But it is perfectly possible for the local acceptance of a form of reasoning to satisfy our sense of curiosity, even though the general acceptance of this form of reasoning would undermine itself if it were adopted in an unrestricted form. For this is exactly what Hume believes to be true with respect to ordinary causal reasoning. The acceptance of ordinary causal reasoning often leads us to form stable and curiosity-satisfying beliefs about many matters of fact, even though this form of reasoning would destroy all belief if it were applied without restriction.

Given this, it is no surprise that the sort of evaluation we find in Book 1 has close structural similarities to Humean moral evaluation. For, in fact, it is just a special form thereof. In particular, as noted above, a way of reasoning will count as epistemically virtuous in this restricted sense just in case it satisfies at least one of the four criteria noted above. For it is just those ways of reasoning that directly or indirectly satisfy the curiosity of the reasoner and others in his epistemic community that elicit our approval when we consider them in the manner just described. Thus, the Title Principle, and Hume’s general distinction between “good” and “bad” reasoning, follow naturally from the manner in which Hume is evaluating different forms of reasoning in these passages when they are understood in these terms.

Of course, as Hume’s discussion of “danger” makes clear, practical considerations are not wholly absent from the close of Book 1. And in other contexts, these sorts of practical considerations will play a greater role in our evaluation of our intellectual propensities — as Hume’s discussion of these issues in T 3.3.4 makes clear. But it is just as clear that the factors that dominate T 1.4.7 are those just noted. And insofar

63. See Korsgaard’s discussion of these issues in *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

64. Once again, this picture of things seems to me truer to Hume’s own reflections during the course of 1.4.7. For an attempt to defend the Title Principle through an appeal to the sort of “reflective endorsement” found in Baier and Korsgaard, see Henry E. Allison’s *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a critical discussion of Allison’s view, see my review of *Custom and Reason in Hume* in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2009.

65. It is worth stressing that by this point the significance of the Title Principle in particular has largely dropped out of the present account. Thus, even those who are skeptical about the importance of this Principle in particular can still accept my conclusions.
as Hume’s positive evaluation of certain forms of reasoning is based on this sort of approval, we can think of him as endorsing these ways of reasoning on grounds that are epistemic — as opposed to merely practical — in character. Of course, Hume does not attempt to isolate these two sorts of factors from one another, but he could have easily done so, and if he did, the result would have been the conception of epistemic virtue just described — which, if I am right, is what dominates his discussion at the close of Book 1.

To explain the broadly epistemic character of such curiosity-based virtues, it will be helpful to say a bit more about Hume’s conception of curiosity. For Hume curiosity is, in the first instance, “the love of truth”. Thus, a way of forming beliefs will satisfy someone’s curiosity only insofar as it produces beliefs that they take to be true. And, just as in the moral case, once we consider an intellectual trait from the “general and steady point of view”, we will approve only of ways of forming beliefs that generally tend to satisfy the curiosity of the believer and her community, whether or not they produce beliefs that the believer or her community takes to be true in any particular case. Thus, from this point of view, we will approve of intellectual traits only insofar as they are “fitted” under normal conditions to produce beliefs that satisfy the curiosity of members of the believer’s community. Thus,

66. Of course, this means that there will be cases in which both practical and epistemic characteristics are relevant to whether a character trait counts as a virtue. My point here is simply that epistemic considerations are in fact relevant to this question and that it is these considerations that dominate the discussion of 1.4.7.

67. For some general discussion of the role that curiosity plays in Hume’s response to skepticism, see Lorne Falkenstein’s “Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism in Hume’s Account of Belief”, Hume Studies 23:1 (1997), 29–72. Although I applaud Falkenstein’s focus on the importance of curiosity for these questions, I differ from him with regards to the nature of this importance. For Falkenstein, curiosity is important in this context because it is itself a moral virtue. As a result, Falkenstein’s account of these matters, if I am not mistaken, is best understood as an instance of the Practical Reading just discussed — while my aim in this section is to show that there is a notion of purely epistemic virtue implicit in the role that curiosity plays in this context for Hume.

68. Compare Hume’s discussion of “virtue in rags” at T 3.3.1.20 / SBN 584–5: “To this we may reply, that where any object, in all its parts, is fitted to attain an intellectual trait will count as an epistemic virtue in the sense just defined only to the degree that it tends (under normal circumstances) to produce beliefs that the believer and those in her narrow circle take to be true.

But what of intellectual traits that tend, under normal conditions, to produce beliefs that are taken by the believer and her community to be true, despite actually being false? Should such traits be counted as intellectual virtues on the present account? This question, of course, is equivalent to whether such a trait, when considered from the “steady and general point of view”, elicits a positive response from the moral sense when it focuses on its ability to satisfy the passions of curiosity and ambition. And the answer to this question depends on whether we take the sort of “satisfaction” at issue here (i) to be merely a matter of the subjective state of mind of the believer and those in her community or (ii) to be a matter of the degree to which those individuals actually achieve the end associated with curiosity — e.g., true beliefs. This is a tricky issue in Hume interpretation, and it seems to me that there is some room to read Hume both ways on this point. But in the end it is the second reading that I believe fits best with the text. For example, as Hume says, although the ability of reasoning to please our curiosity depends heavily on subjective factors, it also requires that there be “a degree of success in the attainment of the end” — that is, in “the discovery of that truth we examine” (T 2.3.10.7 / SBN 451). If so, then just as the moral sense will not approve of traits that merely appear to those who possess them to be beneficial, it will also not approve of traits that merely seem to the possessor to produce true beliefs.

If we read Hume in this manner, then true Humean epistemic virtue any agreeable end, it naturally gives us pleasure, and is esteem’d beautiful, even tho’ some external circumstances be wanting to render it altogether effectual. ’Tis sufficient if every thing be compleat in the object itself. ... Where a character is, in every respect, fitted to be beneficial to society, the imagination passes easily from the cause to the effect, without considering that there are still some circumstances wanting to render the cause a compleat one. General rules create a species of probability, which sometimes influences the judgment, and always the imagination.”
requires, not just that an intellectual trait reliably produces beliefs that the believer takes to be true, but also that it tends to produce beliefs that actually are true.\textsuperscript{69} If so, then we will approve in this manner only of ways of forming beliefs that are generally reliable under normal conditions, just as we would expect to be true of a genuinely epistemic form of evaluation.\textsuperscript{70}

That having been said, while Hume does describe curiosity as “the love of truth”, this passion does not love all truths — or hate all falsehoods — equally. For, as Hume says about those truths that are based in relations of ideas: “‘Tis certain, that the former species of truth, is not desir’d merely as truth, and that ‘tis not the justness of our conclusions, which alone gives the pleasure” (T 2.3.10.2 / SBN 448–9). Rather, as Hume goes on to detail, at least two additional qualities are generally required in order for a truth to engage our sense of curiosity: First, there must be some “genius and capacity, which is employ’d in its invention and discovery” (T 2.3.10.3 / SBN 449). And, second, the “truth we discover must also be of some importance” (T 2.3.10.4 / SBN 449–50).\textsuperscript{71}

Now it may seem that the presence of the second of these considerations undermines the idea that curiosity-based evaluations may be thought of as epistemic — as opposed to practical — in character. But while our practical interests do play a role in determining what excites our curiosity, this role is decidedly secondary. In short, what is fundamental here are two factors: first, the pleasure we take in the inventive activity of the mind and, second, the fact that just as “the vivacity of the idea gives pleasure, so its certainty prevents uneasiness, by fixing one particular idea in the mind, and keeping it from wavering in the choice of its objects” (T 2.3.10.12 / SBN 453–4). It is these two qualities of the mind that shape our sense of curiosity for Hume.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, our practical interests come into play here only insofar as they are relevant to the “force” with which an idea “strikes on us”. Where an idea does not interest us, it will lack this force — and so its fixity or variation will be unable to excite any great pleasure or pain.

To be sure, this indicates a location in which there seems to be a degree of what has come to be called “pragmatic encroachment” upon epistemic evaluation within Hume’s account. That is, it represents a respect in which epistemic evaluation is sensitive to practical factors or concerns beyond those that are sometimes taken to be proper to epistemology. But there are many cases in which our epistemic evaluations appear to be sensitive to exactly these sorts of factors.\textsuperscript{73} And, as we have already noted, the spirit of Hume’s discussion of these issues is contrary to any attempt to draw a hard-and-fast line between factors of an epistemic and a practical sort. So the presence of such factors is no great surprise.

Thus, while our sense of curiosity is based in a love of truth, it is not a mere love of truth as such for Hume. Rather, our curiosity delights in ways of reasoning that are generally reliable and that are likely to have the following consequences:

1. They produce relatively stable ideas, which are sufficiently lively to end inquiry.\textsuperscript{74}

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\textsuperscript{69} Or at least that the evaluator takes to be true.

\textsuperscript{70} I return to the relationship between this view and reliabilism below.

\textsuperscript{71} David Owen takes these passages to indicate that curiosity alone has little motivational force, but they seem to me to better understood as components of Hume’s characterization of what curiosity is. See the discussion of these issues in the final chapter of Hume’s *Reason*. The observation that our sense of curiosity is not equally excited by all truths is commonplace in the recent literature on this subject. For example, see Ernest Sosa’s discussion of these issues in his “For the Love of Truth?” in Linda Zagzebski and Abrol Fairweather, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{72} Thus, according to Hume, while curiosity is interested in the truth, this interest is the product of these more basic psychological tendencies. Compare again the comparison between philosophy, hunting, and gaming at T 2.3.10.7–11.


\textsuperscript{74} As implied by the passage noted above at T 2.3.10.12. For the idea that moderately lively ideas are a source of pleasure, see T 1.3.5.2 / SBN 84. And compare again Hume’s com-
2. They produce such ideas in areas that are of interest to us, or they produce such ideas via inventive trains of thought that indicate a certain "genius".\textsuperscript{75}

3. They produce a general agreement concerning such ideas, at least within one’s “intellectual community”.\textsuperscript{76}

Thus, while we might gloss curiosity as the “love of truth”, its love of truth is not direct or unmediated.\textsuperscript{77} Rather, we love truth because of certain more basic properties of the human mind — and, in particular, we take pleasure from stable and fixed beliefs and pain in violent os-

\textsuperscript{75} For these reasons, I agree with Louis Loeb that the stability of our beliefs plays an important role in Hume’s normative epistemology. But unlike Loeb, I believe that the role that stability plays is based on its influence on our sense of curiosity and the associated forms of epistemic evaluation. Of course, Loeb might reply that, on the contrary, curiosity is significant in the manner I suggest because it approves of stable beliefs and because stable beliefs tend to be true. But, to my mind, this does not do justice to the role that curiosity plays in 1.4.7. As a result, Loeb is pushed into a view on which Hume is forced by the arguments of 1.4 to reject the very stability-based conception of epistemic merit he puts forward in 1.3. As I have been arguing, this result can be avoided once we recognize the manner in which the epistemic value of stability becomes grounded in the passion of curiosity by the end of 1.4.7. Thus, on the reading I prefer, we can read 1.4 as endorsing (as opposed to undermining) the elements that Loeb identifies as operating behind the scenes in 1.3.

\textsuperscript{76} As is implied by the discussion at 2.3,10.3–4 / SBN 449–50. Thus, by this standard, there will be little epistemic virtue in a tendency to discover banal or obvious truths about matters of no interest to us. (This point should not be confused with the claim that beliefs about such matters are never supported by evidence or never count as knowledge.)

\textsuperscript{77} In this way, the significance of a sort of intellectual ambition is internal to the nature of Humean curiosity itself. As I discuss below, given Hume’s understanding of the power of sympathy, there is nothing very surprising about this.

The nature of curiosity and its relationship to issues of “epistemic value” is beginning to attract a considerable degree of attention. For an account of the nature of curiosity different than the one I attribute to Hume, see Dennis Whitcomb’s “Curiosity Was Framed”, forthcoming in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. See also the essay by Sosa mentioned above, Gilbert Harman’s Change in View: Principles of Reasoning (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), and Alvin I. Goldman’s Knowledge in a Social World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).


\textsuperscript{79} For this charge against a curiosity-based reading of Hume, see again section 5 of Ridge’s “Epistemology Moralized”.

cillations in them. In this way, Hume’s view of the significance of truth is quite different from the affirmation of the significance of “truth for its own sake” that is often associated with more rationalistic strands within modern philosophy.\textsuperscript{78}

This fact about curiosity is particularly important with respect to whether this account is viciously circular or question-begging. As discussed above, one of the goals of Hume’s discussion in 1.4.7 is to recommend a moderate level of trust in our faculties over the forms of belief formation he associates with “religion” and “superstition”. But if curiosity really were just the “love” of the truth as such, it would be difficult to see how an appeal to curiosity would give Hume a basis for arguing for his recommended method of belief formation to this alternative. After all, surely the proponent of religious enthusiasm could simply respond to any such argument by insisting that it is the acceptance of his method — and not Hume’s — that provides one with reliable access to the truth.\textsuperscript{79}

Whether this sort of “question-begging” would trouble Hume overly is an interesting question. But, in any case, this is not the situation Hume finds himself in on my account. For curiosity is not merely the love of truth as such — rather, it is (in part) the love of stable, shared beliefs about matters of interest to us which are the product of invention and genius. And, as discussed above, even bracketing the question of the truth of his conclusions about (say) God, Hume is in a position to offer a controversial, but non-question-begging argument for the claim that the acceptance of his method delivers these sorts of beliefs more effectively than the acceptance of the methods of his opponents.

The nature of Humean curiosity is similarly significant for whether Hume is a reliabilist about epistemic virtue. If my remarks above are correct, the answer to this question is a qualified “no”. For while the
reliability of a form of reasoning will do much to determine its ability to satisfy our curiosity. reliability is not all that is relevant here. In particular, a highly reliable process may produce beliefs that do little to engage our sense of curiosity. And in such cases, there will be little reason for us to treat the process in question as epistemically virtuous. Moreover, the reliability of a belief-forming method is relevant here only if this method leads to vivacious and stable beliefs that are shared by the believer and those around him. Thus, while reliability is significant for Hume’s discussion, it is hardly all that matters. And its significance is ultimately derivative from the connection between the reliability of a process and its ability to satisfy our curiosity. In this way, Hume is at most a sort of qualified reliabilist, for whom reliability is only one necessary condition on epistemic virtue among several.80

Given all this, hopefully it is relatively easy to see why the sort of curiosity-based approval of a way of reasoning that we have been discussing might be taken to involve a positive epistemic evaluation. But what of the second passion mentioned above: namely, intellectual ambition? We have already noted a number of dimensions along which these two passions are closely tied to one another for Hume. But there is a further such connection that is highly relevant here. For given the operations of Humean sympathy, any conflict between my beliefs and those in my community will tend to have a destabilizing effect on my own beliefs. Thus, it is simply impossible for a normal human being who is concerned with satisfying their curiosity to not also be concerned with whether they can satisfy their sense of intellectual ambition.

80. Once again, whether reliability is even a necessary condition will depend on one’s interpretation of Humean curiosity. Similar points apply to attempts to read Hume as possessing an account of epistemic virtue in terms of proper functioning. Contrary to such accounts, if the present reading is correct, what determines whether some trait is an epistemic virtue is not whether it is a form of biological (or indeed theological) proper functioning, but rather whether it is capable of satisfying certain passions. Of course, one might put this point in terms of “proper functioning” language, but this would obscure the real thrust of the view.

This helps to explain why inquiry for Hume is a fundamentally social phenomenon.81 For the epistemic significance of ambition, and so the social dimension of epistemic evaluation, follows directly from the curiosity-based account we have been developing of Humean epistemic evaluation. And this point is only strengthened when we consider the manner in which such evaluation is affected by “general and steady point of view”. For what matters from this point of view is not simply whether a mode of inquiry is able to satisfy the believer’s own curiosity, but also whether it can satisfy the curiosity of others in the believer’s epistemic community. Thus, when we consider whether an intellectual trait is effective at satisfying our curiosity from this point of view, we naturally find ourselves drawn to consider both its ability to satisfy the believer’s curiosity and its ability to satisfy her sense of intellectual ambition.82

In this way, it is possible to understand our appropriately modified passions of curiosity and intellectual ambition as providing us with a vantage point from which to make an epistemic — as opposed to a

81. For the idea that Humean inquiry is fundamentally social in character, see again Baier’s A Progress of Sentiments. And for another important discussion of the social dimension of Hume’s epistemology, see Williams’ “The Unity of Hume’s Philosophical Project”. As Williams stresses, the social dimension to Hume’s concerns is crucial for understanding the precise sort of stability he is concerned with epistemically. This is particularly significant insofar as it buttresses Hume’s worries about “superstition” as a way of forming beliefs. For, given the history of modern European religious conflict, Hume takes it to be an empirical fact that “religious superstition” is a poor way of arriving at stable and shared beliefs over the long haul.

82. Compare Hume’s characterization of his (initial) failure to satisfy his ambitions in 1.4.7: “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?” (T 1.4.7.2 / SBN 264–5) As this characterization (as well as the discussion of 1.4.7.11 / SBN 270) makes clear, the sort of ambition at issue here is a matter of a desire for success within the epistemic community of which Hume is a member. In addition, the importance of ambition for Hume is clear in the Advertisement to the Treatise, where he writes, “The approbation of the public I consider as the greatest reward of my labours; but am determin’d to regard its judgment, whatever it may be, as my best instruction” (emphasis in text).
purely practical — evaluation of how we reason. Of course, while this vantage point is recognizably epistemic, it is also passionate. Thus, unlike his rationalist opponents, Hume is not attracted to the view that epistemology is based on a wholly intellectual concern for the truth. Rather, for Hume, epistemology — like morals — is rooted in our passionate nature, and in particular in the manner in which our reasoning may be a source of pleasure and pain for us and those around us. Thus, as Annette Baier has stressed, Hume’s epistemology is both social and passionate. In fact, it is passionate in at least two related, but distinct, senses. First, as our discussion of the Title Principle indicates, Hume’s epistemology generally treats as virtuous individuals whose reasoning is guided by the intellectual passions of curiosity and ambition and the propensities for reasoning that these passions produce. And, second, this positive evaluation is itself based upon the tendency of these propensities to satisfy these passions in the believer and those around him. Of course, there is a non-accidental connection between these facts — for reasoning that is guided by these passions will, in general, be more likely to satisfy them. But this need not always be the case. After all, as the example of Hume’s own reasoning in early stages of 1.4 shows, it is perfectly possible for one’s curiosity to lead one down dead ends of reasoning which deliver no satisfaction. Thus, the wise and virtuous reasoner will at times fight against the extremes of his own passions of curiosity and ambition, just as Hume himself must have done. And, while a moderate degree of curiosity and ambition are intellectual virtues on this view, unrestricted forms of these passions are anything but.

But while Hume’s epistemology is passionate in these two senses, this does not mean that it collapses into a merely practical evaluation of our beliefs. Nor should we reduce it to a crude form of “epistemic consequentialism” any more than we should read Hume’s moral theory in such terms. Rather, Hume’s epistemology is fundamentally a virtue epistemology — one that, while rooted in our passions, is nonetheless epistemic in character. And this account seems to me to be of much more than merely historical interest. For while there has been a wave of interest in virtue epistemology within recent years, relatively little of this work has been concerned with accounts of epistemic virtue like the one I have found in Hume. Most importantly, there has, to my knowledge, been relatively little consideration of the sentimentalist idea that our understanding of epistemic virtues might be rooted in the intellectual passions. And yet this idea, especially for those of us attracted to a sentimentalist account of moral virtue, should have considerable appeal. For not only does it offer a naturalistically unproblematic explanation of the origins of epistemic evaluation, it also offers a natural explanation of just why it is that we find epistemic virtue valuable. Thus, if this essay is correct, we find another way in which Hume still has much to teach us today, especially when we are willing to read him in novel and unexpected ways.

84. This essay has benefitted from helpful comments from a wide variety of individuals. First and foremost among them are a number of truly exceptional anonymous referees, to whom I am extremely grateful. In addition, special thanks are due to Yuval Avnur, John Camacho, Don Garrett, Heiner Klemme, Kieran Setiya, and Nick Stang — as well as audiences at Cornell University, the Pittsburgh Area Philosophy Colloquium, the 37th Hume Society Conference, and my graduate seminar on Hume — for much helpful feedback.