

EPISTEMOLOGÍA Y ESCEPTICISMO

Normativity And Probable Reasoning: Hume On Induction

La normatividad y el razonamiento probable. Hume y la inducción

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the debate between epistemic and descriptivist interpreters of Hume's discussion of induction and probable reasoning. Epistemic interpreters view Hume as primarily concerned with questions relating to the epistemic authority and justification of our inductive principles and beliefs. Descriptivist interpreters, in contrast, suggest that Hume aims to explain how our inductive beliefs are produced, not to ascertain whether they are epistemically justified. I focus on three of these readings in particular: two of them epistemic, the third descriptivist. The first epistemic reading, presented by Peter Millican, portrays Hume as embracing scepticism about induction; the second epistemic reading, put forward by Louis Loeb, presents him as a non-sceptical externalist about justification; the descriptivist reading, defended by David Owen, presents Hume as engaged primarily in the scientific task of describing the mechanisms by which we come to form our beliefs.

In this paper, I propose an alternative to these sceptical, externalist and descriptivist interpretations. I argue that, although these readings possess undeniable strengths and although they are crucial in furthering our understanding of Hume's thinking, they face problems that are potentially insurmountable. I conclude that the best strategy open to us is to pursue a non-sceptical, non-externalist epistemic account of Hume's position. Part of my aim will be to question an assumption that is implicit in all three of these readings: the assumption that, for Hume, the concept of human nature is purely descriptive.

Resumen: En este artículo examino el debate entre los intérpretes epistémicos y descriptivistas de la discusión humeana de la inducción y el razonamiento probable. Los intérpretes epistémicos consideran a Hume como preocupado principalmente con cuestiones relacionadas con la autoridad y justificación epistémica de nuestros principios y creencias inductivas. Los intérpretes descriptivistas, por contra, sugieren que lo que Hume pretende es explicar cómo se producen nuestras creencias, no dictaminar si están epistémicamente justificadas. En particular, me centro en tres de estas lecturas: dos de ellas epistémicas, la tercera descriptivista. La primera interpretación epistémica, la de Peter Millican, nos presenta a Hume abrazando un escepticismo respecto a la inducción; la segunda lectura epistémica, de Louis Loeb, lo presenta como un externalista no escéptico a propósito de la inducción; la lectura descriptivista, defendida por David Owen, presenta a un Hume comprometido principalmente con la tarea científica de describir los mecanismos por los que llegamos a formar nuestras creencias. En este artículo propongo una interpretación alternativa a estas interpretaciones escépticas, externalistas y descriptivistas. Argumento que, aunque estas lecturas tienen innegables puntos de apoyo y ayudan crucialmente a mejorar nuestra comprensión del pensamiento de Hume, todas ellas enfrentan problemas potencialmente insuperables. Concluyo que la mejor estrategia que nos queda abierta pasa por perseguir una explicación que no sea ni escéptica ni externalista de la posición de Hume. Parte de mi objetivo es cuestionar una asunción implícita en estas tres lecturas, a saber: que para Hume el concepto de naturaleza humana es puramente descriptivo.

Fecha de recepción: . Fecha de aceptación: .

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Key words: Hume. Induction. Probable reasoning. Scepticism. Externalism. Descriptivism. Nature. Millican. Loeb. Owen.

Palabras clave: Hume. Inducción. Razonamiento probable. Escepticismo. Externalismo. Descriptivismo. Naturaleza. Millican. Loeb. Owen.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have brought extraordinary changes to the way in which we interpret Hume's writings on human understanding in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. The debates that have emerged under the broad umbrella of the New Hume have been rich and extremely positive to Humean scholarship, so much so that there is now a consensus (highly unusual in philosophy!) as to the fact that some of the traditional approaches to Hume's texts are, in effect, obsolete.¹ In this paper, I focus on one of these recent debates: that between epistemic and descriptivist interpreters of Hume's discussion of induction or probable reasoning.² Epistemic readings present Hume's discussions of induction as turning primarily on issues of justification or warrant. According to these readings, Hume is concerned, first and foremost, with the question of whether or not some of our key principles or (depending on the context) our beliefs are justified or warranted. Epistemic readers have typically portrayed Hume as giving negative answers to such questions. In other words, they have presented Hume as embracing the sceptical view that the principles or beliefs under consideration are *not*, in fact, justified or warranted. I will call this line of interpretation the Sceptical epistemic reading.³ Recent years have also seen the emergence of an epistemic but non-sceptical reading of Hume's treatment of induction, one that portrays him as embracing an externalist approach to justification. I will call this the Externalist reading.⁴ Descriptivist readings, in contrast, differ from epistemic ones (in their Sceptical and Externalist variants) in that they maintain that Hume is *not* primarily concerned with the issue of epistemic justification.⁵ Instead they see Hume as engaged, for the most part, in the development of a new cognitive science, one whose aim is to *explain* the formation of our beliefs, to identify the causal mechanisms that produce them – not to establish whether they are *justified*.⁶ Hume's aim, in the Descriptivist view, is not to establish whether or how our beliefs are justified, but to explain how they are caused.

1 On this, see notably Beebe (2006) ch. 5 and Millican (2007) pp. 163-164.

2 Owen makes a persuasive point against the overuse of the term 'induction' in the context of Hume's writings – see Owen (1999) p. 113 n. 1. Although I certainly take this point, I shall, for the sake of simplicity, continue using the term 'induction' in this paper, alongside the expression 'probable reasoning'. This term 'induction' is used by other participants on both sides of the debate – see, for instance, Millican (2007) p. 164, Garrett (1997) p. 76 and Loeb (2006) p. 321.

3 Sceptical readings are advanced by Flew, Stroud and, in a modified form, by Millican; See Flew (1961), Stroud (1977), Millican (1995), Millican (1998), Millican (2000), Millican (2001), Millican (2002), Millican (2007). I am borrowing the labels 'sceptical' and 'descriptivist' from Loeb – Loeb (2006) pp. 322 & 324.

4 Externalist accounts are defended by Loeb and Schmitt, amongst others. See Loeb (2002), Loeb (2006), Schmitt (1992) and Schmitt (2004).

5 Descriptivist interpreters include Garrett, Owen and Noonan – see Garrett (1997), Garrett (2002), Owen (1999) and Noonan (1999).

6 I am using the expression 'causal mechanisms' in a broad sense that is compatible with both Owen and Garrett's accounts. Cf. Garrett (1997) p. 92 and Owen (1999) pp. 132-133.

In this paper, I propose an alternative to the Sceptical, Externalist and Descriptivist lines of interpretation. I argue that, although these readings possess undeniable strengths and although they have been crucial in furthering our understanding of Hume's thinking, they face problems that are potentially insurmountable – problems that are likely to render them, ultimately, unviable. One of my aims is to show that these readings share an implicit assumption: the assumption that, for Hume, the concept of human nature is essentially descriptive. In my view, challenging this assumption opens the way for a different interpretative line, one that is free from the difficulties encountered by these three readings.

In sections 2, 3 and 4, I critically examine the Sceptical, Descriptivist and Externalist interpretations as they emerge in the works of, respectively, Peter Millican, David Owen and Louis Loeb. I conclude that the best strategy open to us is to pursue a non-sceptical, non-externalist epistemic account of Hume's position. In section 5, I present an alternative interpretative approach, one that does not play on the externalist – internalist distinction, but that may lead us a different understanding of Hume's conception of human nature.

2. The Sceptical Epistemic Reading

Hume's discussion of induction in *Treatise* I.iii.6 and *Enquiry* IV is notoriously difficult. One fundamental question to arise from these passages is this: is Hume concerned with the epistemic justification of our inductive principles or beliefs or is he first and foremost interested in describing the causal mechanisms that produce these beliefs – regardless of their justification? In this section, I examine how the Sceptical reading attempts to address this question and the problems it faces in so doing.

Peter Millican, in a series of carefully crafted, thought-provoking texts, has developed a modified version of the Sceptical epistemic reading of Hume's position on induction. In his view, Hume is primarily concerned with investigating the rational grounds – that is, the justification – for the Uniformity Principle. Millican describes the Uniformity Principle as the principle that 'the behaviour of things we have observed is *positively evidentially relevant* to the behaviour of things we have not observed' (Millican 2007, p. 194). The Uniformity Principle is central here in that it forms the basis for all inductive inferences. More specifically, the transitivity of rational justification means that, if this principle lacks rational grounds, the entire edifice of inductive inference will lack such grounds too. According to Millican, Hume's discussion shows that no rational grounds can be found for this principle and therefore that inductive inferences are not justified. The notion of 'rational grounds' at work in this reading is comparatively broad: when Hume concludes that there are no rational grounds for the Uniformity Principle, he is excluding not only demonstrative inferences (understood in a wide sense of the phrase as informal – rather than formal – deductions, that is, as arguments in which the premise or premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion),⁷ but also all sensory and intuitive evidence. This is important since, for Millican, one of Hume's principal targets is Locke's account of probable reasoning (or reasoning based on rational perception).⁸ This broad understanding of Hume's notion of rational grounds renders Hume's

7 Cf. Flew (1961). Millican discusses Flew's account in Millican (2000) p. 166.

8 See Millican (2000) and Millican (2007) pp. 176-186 and 194-195

sceptical conclusion all the more devastating in its scope. For Hume's negative conclusion is that there can be no rational grounds *whatsoever* – and therefore, in this account, no justification whatsoever – for the Uniformity Principle.⁹ Millican writes:

[the Uniformity Principle] has no possible basis in reason, because it is not intuitively evident, cannot be established on the basis of what we perceive, cannot be inferred deductively from anything that we have experienced, and cannot be inferred inductively without begging the question. (*Italics added. Millican 2007, p. 166.*)

Having established that there can be no rational grounds for the Uniformity Principle, Hume goes on to explain why this principle nevertheless features so centrally in our thinking. Millican suggests that the principle

is entirely non-rational, and is the product not of reason but merely of a certain brute 'natural instinct, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or to prevent' (*Enquiry, pp. 46-47*). This instinct is what 'makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past' (*Enquiry p. 44*), and Hume calls it 'custom' or 'habit'. (*Millican 2000, p. 189*)

In this view, therefore, Hume's notion of 'custom' emerges at the heart of what he regards as the sceptical solution to his sceptical problem: although there are absolutely no rational grounds for those beliefs produced on the basis of inductive inferences, we continue forming these beliefs because it is psychologically impossible for us not to do so.

The instinctive mechanism of custom, though not in any way supplying the rational perception that Locke has taken for granted as a requirement for rational belief, steps into the breach and leaves us psychologically unable to refrain from forming beliefs about the unobserved. (*Millican 2007, p. 195*)

Millican's reading of Hume's discussion of induction has much to recommend it.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difficulty with this line of interpretation, to wit: Hume's repeated defence of empirical, inductive science (that is, of science based on experience) over other forms of belief-forming processes. Millican himself admits this difficulty when he writes:

On induction, for example, there really is a problem about reconciling a sceptical interpretation [...] with the positive view of inductive science he takes elsewhere. (*Millican 2007, p. 164*)

⁹ Millican argues, similarly, that, for Hume, 'our belief in the external world [is] rationally indefensible' – see Millican (2002) pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ In particular, Millican's broad notion of what counts as rational grounds for Hume and his account of the scope of Hume's negative argument are both highly persuasive. For a defence of these over Owen's narrower view of Hume's target, see Millican (2007) pp. 181-186.

Millican attempts to address this difficulty by suggesting that Hume's favouring of inductive science may be explained on pragmatic grounds. Crucially, since custom makes it psychologically impossible for us not to form certain beliefs about the unobserved, we might as well embrace a system of enquiry in which experience is carefully weighed and taken into account. Millican writes:

Having identified custom as the 'sceptical solution' to his 'sceptical doubts', Hume's procedure is to follow through its demands systematically. If we cannot help making judgements and forming beliefs on the basis of conformity with our past experience, then we can at least be discriminating in applying this standard. We can also dismiss aprioristic metaphysics, since only experience can receive custom's endorsement. (Millican 2007, p. 195)

This, Millican suggests, lies at the heart of Hume's vindication of empirical science over superstition: we may or may not find this defence of empirical science persuasive, but it remains the case that Hume's endorsement of empirical science is fuelled by pragmatic considerations of this type.¹¹

This is an interesting attempt to block what is perhaps the most important line of objection against the Sceptical reading and Millican's version of this reading is all the more effective for it. Nevertheless, it remains unclear to what extent this approach can genuinely succeed. Part of the problem here has to do with the use Hume makes of inductive inferences in the writing of both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. As Don Garrett observes:

Hume himself makes inductive inferences constantly – before, during and after the famous argument of *Treatise* I.iii.6. (Garrett 1997, p. 78)

A similar consideration leads Annette Baier to conclude:

If Hume really distrusts causal inference, then he must distrust his own *Treatise*. (Baier, 1991, p. 55)

It is not merely the *number* of inductive inferences that feature in Hume's arguments, but the sheer *ease* with which Hume appears to make use of them at times, *as if there was nothing much problematic about such inferences after all*.¹² The number of passages that illustrate this point abound – from the setting up of the Copy Principle at the beginning of the *Treatise*, through his discussion of belief in *Treatise* I.iii.8, to his discussion of Miracles in the first *Enquiry* X.¹³ This, to my mind, remains a persisting problem for the Sceptical reading.

11 Millican writes: 'Whether all this can succeed as a way of vindicating empirical science over superstition can, of course, be debated. But I think it is very clear that Hume himself was committed to something like this strategy.' – Millican (2007) p. 195.

12 This is not to deny that Hume experiences genuine moments of sceptical despair. On this, see Sanf elix ???

13 On this, see Loeb (2006) p. 323. Perhaps it could be replied that it is not surprising to find Hume making use of inductive inferences in this way: after all, Millican acknowledges that, for Hume, the human mind finds such

3. Non-Epistemic Descriptivism

It is considerations such as these that have in part fuelled the Descriptivist reading of Hume's discussion of induction, an important version of which is put forward by David Owen.¹⁴ In Owen's view, Hume is not interested in the question of justification as it is currently understood in philosophy. He writes:

It is tempting to read into Hume a more current problem: given that we have such beliefs, how, if at all, are they justified? Hume's problem is more one of explanation than justification: given that we have such beliefs, what is their nature and how is it that we come to have them?' (Owen, 1999, p. 118)

According to Owen, Hume's discussion of induction (or, more accurately for Owen, of probable reasoning¹⁵) in the *Treatise* is best understood as aiming to describe the causal mechanisms that lead the mind to move from certain impressions to certain beliefs (or ideas) about the unobserved. Central here is the view that

probable reasoning, in its most basic form, allows for inferences from one idea to another to be explained without the recourse of the intermediate ideas which are required by reason. (Owen, 1999, p. 131)

The conception of reason at work in this reading is very different from Millican's. For Owen, Hume's discussion aims to undermine one particular conception of probable reasoning, namely reasoning understood as requiring 'the discovery and use of intermediate ideas' in the explanation of the transition from impressions to beliefs (Owen, 1999, p. 132).¹⁶ Hume's view is that our beliefs in the unobserved arise from causal processes that do not always feature intermediate ideas acting as links between impressions and ideas. Hence, in the most basic cases of probable reasoning

a person reasons without reflecting on past experience and without recourse to the uniformity principle [...so that] The transition, the movement of the mind from the impression to the idea, is not an activity of the faculty of reason, conceived of as the

inferences psychologically impossible to resist. If, at times, Hume gives the impression that inductive inferences are non-problematic, it may be because he is, in those passages, simply bowing to their inevitability: since we are incapable of avoiding them, Hume might as well treat them as non-problematic, at least at certain key junctures in his argument. This is, after all, part and parcel of the pragmatic strategy described above. A serious problem remains, however. For Hume does not limit himself to treating some of the inductive inferences he makes as non-problematic: there is, as we will see in section 3, compelling evidence to suggest that he in fact regards them as *epistemically successful*.

14 Owen (1999). Another prominent version of the Descriptivist reading is presented in Garrett (1997).

15 See my footnote 2 above.

16 Owen argues that beliefs are a subcategory of ideas for Hume. For his compelling discussion of this issue, see Owen (1999) pp. 117 – 119.

discovery and use of intermediate ideas which explain the transition. (Owen, 1999, pp. 131-132)¹⁷

Owen acknowledges that there are significant normative elements to both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. At the same time, he maintains that the normative questions that emerge in these texts are very different from the Russellian style of concern over the justification of induction that the Sceptical reading attributes to Hume.¹⁸ Owen notes:

I am not denying that there is a problem of induction that is largely concerned with justification. I am claiming only that it is not Hume's position. (Owen, 1999, p. 139)

According to Owen, two important normative questions arise in the *Treatise*: the first relates to the normative criteria that govern correct and incorrect uses of reason; the second relates to Hume's preference for certain forms of probable reasoning over other belief-forming devices (namely, over those devices he regards as fostering superstition and prejudice). Owen draws the distinction between these two normative questions in the following passage:

Hume can present a theory of reason, both demonstrative and probable, with a criterion of right and wrong ways of using reason, without answering the question whether the beliefs reached by the correct use of reason are justified. We might have a normative criterion for the correct use of reason but wonder whether reason itself is something we should prefer over the alternatives. Consider [...] Roman augury by the inspection of a sacrificed sheep's entrails. There is clearly a right and wrong way of performing such actions, and the practice is clearly normative; priests devoted lifetimes to developing their skills. But we might still wonder whether the practice was warranted. (Owen, 1999, p. 206.)

Owen suggests that the first question – the question concerning the normative criteria that govern correct and incorrect uses of reason – emerges in *Treatise* I.iii.15; the second – the question of why certain forms of probable reasoning should be preferred over other belief-forming mechanisms – is posed in Book IV of the *Treatise* but only genuinely addressed in the first *Enquiry*.¹⁹

There is no doubt that there is textual evidence, certainly in the *Treatise*, in favour of the Descriptivist account.²⁰ Indeed, Owen's interpretation contains some valuable insights into

17 Owen illustrates this point by referring us to Hume's footnote in *Treatise* I, iii, VII, pp. 96-97: 'we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium between them'.

18 Owen (1999) p. 206. On this, see also Garrett (1997) pp. 230-233

19 Owen (1999) p. 206. Owen makes an intriguing proposal on the latter: he argues that, for Hume, reason (when it is used appropriately, as in the mitigated form of scepticism or in 'true philosophy') is to be preferred over other belief-forming processes in that we find it pleasing – that is, because we feel a sentiment of moral approval towards it. Although I will not be discussing this here, there are, in my view, some serious problems with this proposal. We will be returning to the question of the superiority of certain forms of probable reasoning over other belief-forming processes in sections 4 and 5 of this paper.

20 See for example Owen (1999) p. 138.

Hume's thinking, notably, for instance, into his distinction between reflexive and reflective probable reasoning.²¹ (We will be returning to this in sections 4 and 5.) Nevertheless, the Descriptivist reading also presents what I see as some genuinely intractable difficulties.²² In what follows, I would like briefly to discuss what is, in my view, the most pressing problem with the reading. The problem, discussed in a highly persuasive manner by Louis Loeb, is this:²³ there are many passages in Hume's writings that portray individual instances of inductive inferences as positively *epistemically successful*. In other words, Hume often writes as if he regards certain inductive inferences and the beliefs they give rise to as epistemically *justified*. This issue has received much attention elsewhere, so I will limit myself to citing some of the most relevant passages here:²⁴

The only connexion or relation of objects, which can lead us beyond the immediate impressions of our memory and senses, is that of cause and effect; and that because 'tis the only one, on which we can found a *just* inference from one object to another. (Italics added. *Treatise* I.iii.6 pp. 89-90)

One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons *justly* and naturally; tho' that conclusion be derived from nothing but custom. (Italics added. *Treatise* I.iv.4 p. 225)

No matter of fact can be *proved* but from its cause and effect. Nothing can be *known* to be the cause of another but by experience. (Italics added. *Abstract, Treatise* p. 654)

There have, of course, been Descriptivist attempts at blocking this objection. There has, for instance, been an important discussion in the literature as to how we should interpret terms such as 'just', 'prove' and 'knowledge' in this context. In my view, however, this Descriptivist strategy is not successful in the final analysis.²⁵ This, as well as other considerations,²⁶ arbitrates against the Descriptivist approach and in favour of the view that Hume is, after all, engaged with questions relating to the justification of inductive inferences and inductive beliefs in *Treatise* I.iii.6. If this is correct, and I believe it is, we have reached what on the face of it may appear to be something of a paradox: on the one hand, Hume suggests that inductive inferences are not justified on rational grounds; on the other hand, he suggests that they are epistemically justified. The apparent paradox dissolves, however, as soon as we abandon the idea that, for Hume, only reason can possibly provide epistemic justification. This, of course, is the starting point of the Externalist reading.

21 Owen (1999) ch. 9 and pp. 170-172 respectively.

22 See Millican (2007) pp. 181-186 and Loeb (2006) pp. 324-330.

23 See Loeb (2006) pp. 323-324 and 326-327 and Loeb (2008), especially the section entitled 'Evidence that Hume Considers Inductive Inference Justified'.

24 On this, see notably Loeb (2008), especially the section entitled 'Evidence that Hume Considers Inductive Inference Justified' and Loeb (2002) pp. 43-44, nn. 12-13, 47 n. 19, 102 nn. 2-3.

25 See Loeb (2002) pp. 43-44, nn. 12-13, 47 n. 19, 102 nn. 2-3.

26 For instance, the Descriptivist reading also faces some serious problems arising from the structure of Hume's discussion of induction. See Millican (2007) pp. 181 – 186.

4. The Externalist Epistemic Reading

The Externalist interpretation developed by Louis Loeb suggests that Hume rejects the idea that inductive inference is justified on rational grounds but endorses the idea that it is justified on other, non-rational, externalist grounds. Rationality is here to be understood as involving the advancement of any type of good argument. Loeb argues that reading Hume as advancing an epistemic view only forces us to adopt the Sceptical reading if we assume that ‘justification must derive from «reason», from the availability of a cogent argument’ (Loeb, 2006, p. 322). Loeb therefore rejects the idea that, for Hume,

a belief is justified only if it is supported or supportable by good argument. Roughly speaking, this is an internalist assumption. According to epistemic internalism, the justification of a belief depends exclusively upon the beliefs one holds or—in versions that tolerate parasitism—upon beliefs that are available, beliefs one could hold. (Loeb, 2006, p. 333.)

Loeb discusses a range of possible externalist epistemic criteria including stability, reliability and irresistibility. He himself favours the former: a belief is epistemically justified when it is a ‘steady belief’, that is, when it the stable product of custom.²⁷

Although I am sympathetic to many aspects of this account – notably, its central claim that justification need not be based on good argument for Hume – there are, I feel, some grounds for concern here. In the remainder of this section, I will consider two potential pitfalls for this reading. The first relates to the plausibility of rendering the externalist criteria for justification consistent with the variety of passages in which Hume discusses epistemic success and failure. Consider, for instance, the following passage in connection with the stability criterion:

The devotees of that strange superstition [i.e. ‘the Roman Catholic religion’] usually plead in excuse of the mummeries, with which they are upbraided, that they feel the good effect of those external motions, and postures, and actions, in enlivening their devotion, and quickening their fervour [...] We shadow out the objects of our faith, say they, in sensible types and images, and render them more present to us by the immediate presence of these types, than ‘tis possible for us to do, merely by an intellectual view and contemplation. Sensible objects have always a greater influence on the fancy than any other; and this influence they readily convey to those ideas, to which they are related, and which they Resemble. (*Treatise* I.iii.8)

27 Loeb argues for the stability criterion in Loeb (2000); the criterion is then revised in Loeb (2004). Other externalist criteria are discussed in Loeb (2004) and Loeb (2006). Although Loeb favours the stability criterion, he appears open to the possibility of other externalist criteria playing a part in our exegetical strategies. He writes: ‘Adjudicating among [the various externalist criteria] – better yet, understanding how the texts and Hume’s historical position constrain the choices among them – is the central challenge in coming to terms with Hume’s epistemic position’ – Loeb (2006) p. 334.

This passage indicates that being presented with the sensible images of ‘the objects of [their] faith’ can help, through the effects of custom, to enliven the ideas of Catholic practitioners and thus to foster the stability of their beliefs. At the same time Hume’s mention of ‘superstition’ clearly shows that he does not regard these beliefs to be epistemically justified. This would suggest that not all custom based mechanisms *that foster stability* are the kinds of mechanisms that also convey epistemic authority.²⁸

Consider also Hume’s discussion of Education in the following passage:

But can we doubt of this agreement in their influence on the judgment, when we consider the nature and effects Of EDUCATION?

All those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustomed from our infancy, take such deep root, that ‘tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them; and this habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many occasions prevails over that which a-rises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects. Here we must not be contented with saying, that the vividness of the idea produces the belief: We must maintain that they are individually the same. The frequent repetition of any idea infixes it in the imagination; but cou’d never possibly of itself produce belief, if that act of the mind was, by the original constitution of our natures, annex’d only to a reasoning and comparison of ideas. Custom may lead us into some false comparison of ideas. [...]

If we consider this argument from *education* in a proper light, ‘twill appear very convincing; and the more so, that ‘tis founded on one of the most common phaenomena, that is any where to be met with. I am persuaded, that upon examination we shall find more than one half of those opinions, that prevail among mankind, to be owing to education, and that the principles, which are thus implicitly embrac’d, overballance those, which are owing either to abstract reasoning or experience. As liars, by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to remember them; so the judgment, or rather the imagination, by the like means, may have ideas so strongly imprinted on it, and conceive them in so full a light, that they may operate upon the mind in the same manner with those, which the senses, memory or reason present to us. (*Treatise* I.iii.9)

Hume suggests here that ‘education’ (understood primarily as a kind of indoctrination or brainwashing) is capable of producing beliefs that are so resistant to change – so stable in that respect – that it becomes ‘impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them’. The fact that these beliefs display such stability, however, does not qualify them for epistemic approval, hence the comparison with the case of liars. It would seem from passages such as this that steadiness does not guarantee epistemic justification for Hume.²⁹

28 Loeb notes, quite rightly, that his view is not that all custom based mechanisms are conveyors of epistemic authority in Hume’s view – Loeb (2006) p. 334. However, my objection here is that not all custom based mechanisms *that foster stability* may be. For an interesting and generous discussion of the problems with the stability criterion and with other externalists criteria, see Loeb (2004).

29 Loeb attempts to block this objection from Hume’s discussion of education in Loeb (2004) pp. 357 & 393, but I do not find his attempt convincing. In my view, the lack of fit between the externalist criteria and the various passages in which Hume discusses epistemic authority suggests that there is something fundamentally distort-

The second potential pitfall for the Externalist reading arises from Hume's stated preference for certain forms of probable reasoning over other forms of belief-forming processes. In order to clarify this point, it is useful to introduce Hume's distinction between reflexive and reflective probable reasoning. Owen describes this distinction in the following way:

Our probable reasonings come in various forms: at the simple and most basic level, such 'reasonings' are really just *reflexive* responses, conditioned by past stimuli, to current perceptions. At the other extreme, there are complex, *reflective* reasonings, involving conscious consideration of a variety of previous experiences, including experiences of our own instances of reasoning. (Owen, 1999, p. 149)

As an example of reflexive probable reasoning, Owen refers to Hume's discussion of the person who stops walking when confronted with a river in *Treatise* I.iii.8. Hume explains that, in such cases:

The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection. (*Treatise* I.iii.8, p. 104)

Cases of reflexive probable reasoning are, therefore, cases in which custom and experience operate 'expressly and directly, via an unconscious association of ideas' (Owen, 1999, p. 171).

The notion of reflective probable reasoning, in turn, is illustrated by the following example of reasoning on the basis of only one experiment, also in *Treatise* I.iii.8. Hume writes:

In general we may observe, that in all the most established and uniform conjunctions of causes and effects, such as those of gravity, impulse, solidity, &c. the mind never carries its view expressly to consider any past experience: Tho' in other associations of objects, which are more rare and unusual, it may assist the custom and transition of ideas by this reflection. Nay we find in some cases, that the reflection produces the belief without the custom; or more properly speaking, that the reflection produces the custom in an *oblique* and *artificial* manner. I explain myself. 'Tis certain, that not only in philosophy, but even in common life, we may attain the knowledge of a particular cause merely by one experiment, provided it be made with judgment, and after a careful removal of all foreign and superfluous circumstances. Now as after

ing about approaching Hume's texts through the goggles of the internalist-externalist dichotomy. We will consider this issue in section 5.

Loeb might argue that the examples of education and of Catholic practice do not count against his view because they illustrate artificial, rather than natural, belief forming processes. He certainly puts the emphasis on the relevance of naturalistic considerations to the Externalist in remarks such as the following: 'according to [externalist] theories, the epistemic status of a belief depends, at least in part, upon naturalistic facts about the mechanism that produces it' (Loeb, 2006, p. 334). In my view, however, there is a serious question mark over the view of 'nature' and the 'natural' that is implicit in this claim – and, indeed, that is implicit in the Sceptical and Descriptivist readings. We will be touch upon this question in section 5.

one experiment of this kind, the mind, upon the appearance either of the cause or the effect, can draw an inference concerning the existence of its correlative; and as a habit can never be acquir'd merely by one instance; it may be thought, that belief cannot in this case be esteem'd the effect of custom. But this difficulty will vanish, if we consider, that tho' we are here suppos'd to have had only one experiment of a particular effect, yet we have many millions to convince us of this principle; *that like objects placed in like circumstances, will always produce like effects*; and as this principle has established itself by a sufficient custom, it bestows an evidence and firmness on any opinion, to which it can be apply'd. The connexion of the ideas is not habitual after one experiment: but this connexion is comprehended under another principle, that is habitual; which brings us back to our hypothesis. In all cases we transfer our experience to instances, of which we have no experience, either *expressly* or *tacitly*, either *directly* or *indirectly*. (*Treatise* I.iii.8, pp. 104-105).

It is important to note that custom is central to both reflective and reflexive probable reasoning: in reflective reasoning, it operates 'tacitly' or 'indirectly' through a conscious consideration of the Uniformity Principle; in reflexive reasoning it operates 'expressly and directly' through the unconscious associative mechanism.³⁰

It seems clear that successful reflective reasoning is the type of probable reasoning that involves paying conscious attention to good argument. At the same time, reflective probable reasoning, *when it is used appropriately*, is precisely the type of reasoning that characterises 'true philosophy' and that is therefore *favoured* by Hume for its capacity to safeguard us against prejudice and superstition. In my view, Hume's strong preference for this type of probable reasoning does not sit happily with the Externalist agenda. This is the second, and perhaps most important, problem with the Externalist reading. Let us take a moment to consider it.

The idea that reflective probable reasoning differs from and is superior to reflexive probable reasoning (in the sense of being the purview of the wise, rather than the vulgar) emerges in passages such as the following:³¹

Thus our general rules are in a manner set in opposition to each other. When an object appears, that resembles any cause in very considerable circumstances, the imagination naturally carries us to a lively conception of the usual effect, Tho' the object be different in the most material and most efficacious circumstances from that cause. Here is the first influence of general rules. But when we take a review of this act of the mind, and compare it with the more general and authentic operations of the understanding, we find it to be of an irregular nature, and destructive of all the most established principles of reasonings; which is the cause of our rejecting it. This is a second influence of general rules, and implies the condemnation of the former.

30 This point is defended to great effect by Owen in Owen (1999) p. 171

31 Loeb attempts to block this line of objection by portraying Hume as mostly critical of reflective probable reasoning. To my mind, however, passages such as the following show that this is not a convincing strategy. For Loeb's take on Hume's attitude towards reflective reasoning see Loeb (2002) pp. 84-87. For a persuasive defence of the view that reflective probable reasoning is favoured by Hume, see Owen (1999) pp. 209-214.

Sometimes the one, sometimes the other prevails, according to the disposition and character of the person. The vulgar are commonly guided by the first, and wise men by the second. (*Treatise* I.iii.13, 'Of Unphilosophical Probability').

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full proof of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: he weighs the opposite experiments: he considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability. All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority. A hundred instances or experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence. (EHU X, p. 110)

Earlier, I was careful to point out that Hume favours 'reflective probable reasoning, *when it is used appropriately*'.³² According to Hume, reflective probable reasoning can either be used appropriately, in which case it enriches our understanding, or inappropriately, in which case it fizzles out or ends up defeating itself. It is used appropriately when it takes as its starting point the principles that custom (that is instinct or sentiment) furnishes us with – such as the Principle of Uniformity.³³ It is used inappropriately, when it attempts to go beyond custom – as it were – and tries to manufacture its own foundations, as in excessive scepticism or Phyrromism (*Treatise* I.iv and first *Enquiry* XII). This idea is elegantly summarised in the following passages from the otherwise deeply melancholic conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*:

I have already shewn, 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. (*Treatise*, I. iv.7, p. 267.)

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity [here, some inclination or sentiment], it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (*Treatise*, I. iv.7, p. 270.)

32 I am indebted for much of what is to follow to having had a preview of Vicente Sanf elix's paper entitled 'El escepticismo humeano a prop sito del mundo externo', also published in this volume. That paper – Sanf elix (???) – together with Sanf elix (1994) have played an important inspirational role in the development of my views. I am also indebted to Owen's discussion of the warrant of reason in Owen (1999) especially pp. 205-223.

33 And, possibly, the assumptions of the vulgar in Hume's discussion of the external world – see Sanf elix (???) secs. 4 & 5.

Hume thus concludes:

And in this respect I make bold to recommend [true] philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination. (*Treatise*, I. iv.7, p. 271.)

Advocates of the Externalist reading might reply that this is in fact perfectly compatible with their view: reflective probable reasoning is only justified when it is based on custom and satisfies the externalist criteria.³⁴ Nevertheless, the fact that, for Hume, the superior form of probable reasoning is *precisely* the one that requires conscious attention to good argument does not sit happily with the externalist proposal, in my view. That there is a concern about this, within the Externalist camp, emerges in Loeb's negative portrayal of the reflective person – a portrayal I find unconvincing, in light of the textual evidence.³⁵

5. Towards a new epistemic interpretation

We are now in a position to draw a series of important conclusions concerning Hume's discussion of inductive inference – conclusions that open the way, in my view, for a new reading, one that differs from the Sceptical, Descriptivist and Externalist accounts. The first conclusion I draw from our previous discussion is that there are certainly grounds for viewing Hume as concerned, at least in great part, with the question of the epistemic justification of our inductive beliefs. The second is that Hume should nevertheless not be regarded as a sceptic about induction, if 'scepticism' is here taken to be the view that our inductive beliefs are not justified. Hume certainly contends that the principle that forms the basis for our reflective inductive reasonings (the Uniformity Principle) is not justified on rational grounds; but he also regards this principle as *epistemically justified* on the instinctive, non-rational grounds of custom and sentiment. As such, it can play a fundamental normative role in our reflective probable reasoning. Custom and sentiment also provide, via a more direct route, the justification for those beliefs that are formed through reflexive – rather than reflective – probable reasoning. One of Hume's central messages is therefore that reason is not the only possible source of justification. In this respect, the Externalist reading is, I contend, absolutely correct.

The Externalist reading faces some significant challenges in other areas, however. The first challenge is that of ensuring that whatever externalist criterion is proposed really does cohere with the wide range of passages in which Hume discusses cases of epistemic success and failure. The second challenge facing the Externalist reading comes from Hume's preference for reflective probable reasoning as a belief-forming device – a preference that sits very uncomfortably, in my view, alongside epistemic externalism. These difficulties throw serious question marks over the extent to which the Externalist reading is faithful to Hume's intentions.

³⁴ Indeed, see Loeb (2002) pp. 105-111.

³⁵ Loeb (2002) pp. 79-100.

How then are we to understand Hume's views on the justification of inductive inference? I would suggest that, if we are to try and place Hume's position within the spectrum of contemporary epistemic approaches (and I am not certain that this really is a worthwhile exegetical strategy), we might do better to locate it within the contextualist, rather than the externalist, camp. What I mean by this is that we might do better to view Hume as arguing for some restricted form of subject-contextualism, where the epistemic standard is determined by the *nature* of the subject of belief. Thus, it might be appropriate to regard Hume as arguing that, whilst reflexive standards of justification befit non-human animals, infants and (perhaps) the vulgar, other human beings should aspire to the higher standards of reflective probable reasoning – the standards of wise folk and true philosophers, those that involve mitigated, rather than excessive, scepticism.³⁶

This helps to highlight another weakness of the Externalist reading. For the Externalist reading presents Hume's approach to the structure of epistemic justification as essentially *outcome-dependent*. What I mean by this is that, according to these readings, a belief-forming mechanism conveys epistemic authority in so far as it succeeds in delivering certain *outcomes* – that is, in so far as it *produces* beliefs that are stable, or irresistible, or reliable, etc.³⁷ If the parallel with contextualism is correct, however, Hume's thinking about the structure of justification is more *procedural* than outcome-dependent. That is to say, in Hume's view, a belief is justified if it is formed according to the appropriate procedure (the appropriate belief formation process); and what counts as the appropriate procedure depends on the standards that befit the nature of the subject of belief. Although outcome-dependent considerations may well be important for Hume, they are, I would argue, secondary – not primary, as the Externalist reading suggests. Procedural considerations, understood in this limited way, are conceptually prior to outcome-dependent ones for Hume. The idea that outcome-dependent considerations are secondary emerges in passages such as the following, amongst others:

One, who in our climate, should expect better weather in any week of June than in one of December, would reason justly, and conformably to experience; but it is certain, that he may happen, in the event, to find himself mistaken. However, we may observe, that, in such a case, he would have no cause to complain of experience (*EHU X*, p. 110)

One intriguing aspect of the reading I propose here is that it puts Hume's concept of human nature in a new light. The Sceptical, Descriptivist and Externalist readings have in common the assumption that human nature is, for Hume, a purely descriptive, non-normative notion – human nature, in their view, is essentially a collection of brute facts.³⁸ Custom, being a natural mechanism, is itself a brute fact: Sceptical and Descriptivist readers take this as evidence for the view that custom cannot therefore play a normative role, that it cannot supply an adequate notion of justification; Externalist readers, in turn, suggest that custom plays a normative role but only in so far as it is capable of delivering certain normatively

36 On this see notably *Treatise* I.iii. 16 ('Of the reason of animals).

37 The only Externalist criterion that might not fit this description, of the ones discussed by Loeb, is the 'proper function' criterion – Loeb (2006) p. 334. But there are other important problems with this criterion.

38 See, for instance, Millican (2000) p. 189, Owen (1999) p. 118 and Loeb (2006) p. 334.

desirable qualities of belief (such as stability, or irresistibility, or reliability). Further reflection may show, however, that Hume's concept of human nature is far more hybrid than this, that it consists of both normative and descriptive elements. If this were correct, it would help to explain why Hume is so comfortable with the idea that different epistemic standards (that of the vulgar and that of the wise) can be derived from human nature, whilst at the same time suggesting that human nature points to one of these standards (the reflective standard of the wise and of true philosophy) as being superior to the others. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this point in detail. However, it is worth noting that 'natural' does not always equate with 'non-normative' in Hume's writings. When, in Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume divides virtues into 'artificial' and 'natural' ones, he is not thereby suggesting that artificial virtues are normative whereas natural ones are not: both types of virtue are, of course, normative for Hume. We would do well, I think, to re-evaluate Hume's conception of human nature and of what counts as natural; this might prove crucial in furthering our understanding of his approach to epistemic justification.

I would like to end this paper by citing two passages – one from the *Treatise*, the other from the *Enquiry* – that, to my mind, allude to this normative, regulatory aspect of the concept of human nature. If nothing else, these passages point the way for further exploration.

No *weakness* of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call CREDULITY, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others; and this weakness is also very naturally accounted for from the influence of resemblance. When we receive any matter of fact upon human testimony, our faith arises from the very same origin as our inferences from causes to effects, and from effects to causes; nor is there anything but our experience of the *governing principles* of human nature, which can give us any assurance of the veracity of men. But tho' experience be the *true standard* of this, as well as of all other judgments, we seldom *regulate* ourselves entirely by it; but have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation. (Italics added. *Treatise* I.iii.9)

Man is a reasonable being; and as such, receives from science his *proper* food and nourishment: But so narrow are the bounds of human understanding, that little satisfaction can be hoped for in this particular, either from the extent of security or his acquisitions. Man is a sociable, no less than a reasonable being: but neither can he always enjoy company agreeable and amusing, or preserve the *proper* relish for them. Man is also an active being; and from that disposition, as well as from the various necessities of human life, must submit to business and occupation: but the mind requires some relaxation, and cannot always support its bent to care and industry. It seems, then, that *nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to the human race*, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much, so as to incapacitate them for other occupations and entertainments. Indulge your passion for science, says she, but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society. (Italics added. EHU sec. I)

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