

**Hume's Ethics of Belief
(Draft)**

Miriam McCormick

35th International Hume Conference, Akureyri, Iceland, August 5, 2008

Hume is one of the philosophers most quoted or alluded to in support of contemporary positions, rivaled only perhaps by Aristotle. He is seen as the founder of internalism about reason and motivation, the inspiration for non-cognitivism in ethics, and the first to clearly to articulate a compatibilist view of freedom and determinism. In contemporary discussions of belief and the norms that govern them he is invoked in two ways. He is taken to be one of the first to clearly articulate an evidentialist position, and he is seen as the paradigm of one who advocates a position opposed to doxastic voluntarism – viewing belief formation as a purely passive process. It is interesting that these two highlighted aspects of Hume's view can appear to be in tension. For the texts appealed to in support of his evidentialism suggest that we have quite an active role to play in the beliefs we form, to the extent that we can be admonished for forming them in an irresponsible manner. I will explore what these characterizations of Hume get right and what they get wrong. Thinking about belief in a way that is close to the way Hume actually thought about it can help us understand when and why evidential standards for belief should be invoked.

1. Evidentialism:

(i) Hume

Hume's statement at the beginning of "Of Miracles," Section X of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "a wise man therefore proportions his belief to the evidence" (10.1.4)¹ is taken to express his endorsement of evidentialism. He is thus allied with Locke and Clifford in thinking one should never form beliefs without good evidence. Hume says little about what constitutes good evidence. We know that the more

¹ All references to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume, Beauchamp, ed., 1999) are of the form section.part.paragraph. References to Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, Norton and Norton, eds. 2007) are of the form book.part.section.paragraph. References to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Hume, Beauchamp ed., 1998) are of the form section,part.paragraph.

constant and uniform past experience of a certain event has been, the more probable it is that it will occur in the same manner. And it seems the level of justification for our belief in the occurrence of the event is proportional to its probability. Testimony is also an important kind of evidence for our beliefs but Hume thinks experience shows us that some testimony is more reliable than others:

We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other when they are but few, or of doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary with too violent asseverations. There are many other particulars of the same kind, which may diminish or destroy the force of any argument, derived from human testimony. (10.1.7)

In the *Treatise*, Hume goes into somewhat more detail about how belief proportioning works and is more systematic about the rules a wise man should follow in forming beliefs or judgments.² He also considers why people fail to regulate their beliefs according to these rules. The bulk of this discussion is found in *Treatise* 1.3.12, 1.3.13, and 1.3.15. In 1.3.15, he summarizes the “rules by which to judge of cause and effects” that, if followed, will help one form beliefs truly supported by the evidence and avoid some of the common errors that the vulgar commit when forming beliefs. For example, he warns against drawing conclusions without a sufficient number of experiments. If one finds that the augmentation of a certain cause leads to the augmentation of a certain effect, one cannot conclude that however much the cause is augmented, so will be the effect. Hume’s example is heat and pleasure “A certain degree of heat gives pleasure; if you diminish that heat, the pleasure diminishes; but it does not follow that if you augment it beyond a certain degree, the pleasure will likewise augment; for we find that it degenerates into pain.” (1.3.15.9) Even though, all these rules are “natural and simple” Hume realizes that following them “requires the utmost stretch of human judgment.”

² Although Hume does not always use the terms “belief,” and “judgment” synonymously, when he is concerned with beliefs in matter of fact, namely beliefs that objects exist beyond our present sensations, these he also calls judgments. I form a judgment that my friend is in the next room when I hear his voice and I also believe it is so. For a very illuminating discussion on Hume’s view on judgment David Owen’s, “Locke and Hume on Belief, Judgment and Assent” *Topoi* 22: 15–28, 2003.

(1.3.15.11) To discover, for example, that the true cause of the spread of cholera was contaminated water rather than through miasmas required a careful examination of what factors were essential to the spreading. We see the same difficulty now in discussions of the cause of climate change. Debates continue about what is essential and what is superfluous in this phenomenon.

In 1.3.12, “Of the Probability of Causes,” Hume offers an account of how the mind works such that the strength of belief correlates with the strength of evidence. When experience is not completely uniform, there is a certain number of experiments that speak in favor of one outcome, and a number which support the other. Suppose for example, I am contemplating whether you will be on time to meet me for the movie. All the instances that you have been on time will incline my mind to believe that you will be there on time, and all the instances in which you have been late will incline my mind to believe you will be late. The belief in each of these outcomes is similar in its quality and what allows me to form a belief, say that “it is very likely you will be on time,” is that the many different instances in which you have been on time “run into each other, and unite their forces; so as to produce a stronger and clearer view, than what arise from any one alone.” (1.3.12.19) The option with the stronger and clearer view wins out but my conviction will not be as strong as it would be if you were never late because the idea of your lateness opposes the idea of you being on time and “as the contrary views are incompatible with each other...their influence becomes mutually destructive, and the mind is determin’d to the superior only with that force, which remains after subtracting the inferior.” (1.3.12.19)

Hume realizes, however, that despite the natural tendency of the mind he describes in this section, it often happens that people form beliefs in violation of these rules. He explains how this happens in the next section, “of unphilosophical probability.” The “vulgar” will maintain beliefs that result of prejudice, namely beliefs formed on the basis of “general rules contrary to present observation and experience.” (1.3.13.8) They will also tend to believe *x* rather than *y* simply because *x* occurred more recently and is thus conceived by my mind in a more lively manner. Hume thinks beliefs of such kind are “errors” but very common ones which he seeks to account for. He wonders, for example, how it can be that even when faced with the lively impression of a witty

Irishman, one can still maintain the belief that an “Irishman cannot have wit.” His answer is that the same principle which gives rise to our conclusions of causal reasoning produces our prejudiced beliefs, namely custom and habit. When faced with many instances of Irishmen conjoined with lack of wit, we conclude that there is a necessary connection between the two. But when we form beliefs of this kind, even against the evidence, we are mistaking “superfluous circumstances” with “the essential” (T 1.3.13.9). But we can use the more “extensive and constant” general rules that guide our causal judgments to “correct” the “propensity” to make such mistakes.³ Once we have accepted the second set of general rules, we can then actively apply them; that is, test our beliefs according to them, and this is how we can evaluative and revise our beliefs. Now if someone hasn’t developed these habits of reasoning, she will have much less control over what belief she forms and retains. But this seems exactly right; the level of control should correlate with the level of reflection.

(ii) Contemporary accounts

In answering the question of what norms ought to govern belief, the dominant contemporary view is that evidential norms do; I should follow my evidence, and only believe when the evidence is sufficient. Even though these theorists often cite Hume as one of their allies, their picture of belief is more narrow and intellectual than the concept with which Hume is interested in explaining.⁴ One of the strongest forms of evidentialism is defended by Jonathan Adler. For Adler it is a conceptual necessity that beliefs follow evidence; it is conceptually impossible to hold a belief in defiance of evidentialism. So the question, “how ought one form beliefs?” does not, strictly speaking, make sense. Adler thinks it is deeply misleading to apply a certain kind of deontological language to beliefs. When he says “one ought to believe that *p* only if one

³ As Lorne Falkenstein puts it, we can “come to be naturally compelled to accept those ‘second’ general rules that Hume considers to be definitive of legitimate belief, and naturally compelled to revise or at least doubt our other beliefs accordingly.” See Lorne Falkenstein, “Naturalism, Normativity and Scepticism in Hume’s Account of Belief.” *Hume Studies* 23 (1997): 29-72.

⁴ In his *Beliefs’ Own Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT, Press, 2002), Johnathan Adler says that *Evidentialism* is “an ethics of belief advocated by David Hume, John Locke, W.K. Clifford, and many others” (p.25). He quotes both Locke and Clifford but not Hume.

has adequate reasons that p ” this “ought” is not pointing to a duty or direction to action. Because Adler thinks it is conceptually impossible to believe without taking yourself to have adequate reasons for your belief the “ought” is taken as more of a “must” and thus “when I recognize that the evidence establishes (fails to establish) that p , it makes no strict sense to say I ought (or that it is not the case that I ought) to believe p .”⁵ It is not possible to choose between, for example, evidentiary norms and practical ones. For one to truly hold a belief, it must be the case that one takes oneself to hold have sufficient evidence supporting it.

Clearly Hume thinks it is possible to retain a belief even while one recognizes the evidence does not support it. His example of the man who continues to tremble with fear when dangling over a precipice in an iron cage is an example of one retaining a belief against the evidence. For Adler this would not count as a “full belief” held in full awareness. If the man truly saw the evidence as supporting the belief in his safety, he would believe in his safety. Most evidentialists, however, do not think it is conceptually impossible to hold a belief against the evidence but they think it is always irrational to do so. Adler wants to avoid the question of what it is rational to believe because assessments of this kind, “lead discussions of the ethics of belief onto the wrong track in their claims that answers to the question of what one ought to believe are determined by criteria external to belief.”⁶ Adler rejects such *extrinsic* approaches in favor of his *intrinsic* approach which asks what the concept of belief itself demands.

Richard Feldman is an example of one who supports evidentialism but who adopts what Adler would call an extrinsic approach. In his “Ethics of Belief,”⁷ he defends evidentialism, the view that one never ought to believe on insufficient evidence. So why ought one to follow the evidence? Some may say that following the evidence will lead to true beliefs which is our aim as believers. Feldman questions this defense of evidentialism. It is not always the case that following evidence is the best way to get true belief: “If you are in unfortunate circumstances in which information you have will lead you to falsehoods, following your evidence is *not* the best way to the truth.”⁸ Feldman

⁵ Adler, p. 51.

⁶ Ibid, p.26

⁷ Richard Feldman, “The Ethics of Belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LX, N0.3 (2000): 667-695.

⁸ Feldman: 683.

further question whether truth is what is epistemically valuable; is it really what the aim of belief is? He says, “while true beliefs have instrumental value, a person who irrationally believes a lot of truths is not doing well epistemically. In contrast, a person who forms a lot of rational but false beliefs is doing well epistemically.”⁹ So if not truth, what epistemic value is evidentialism in service of? One may think it is knowledge and while Feldman admits that knowledge has value, he questions why it is the *only* thing of epistemic value; it is also valuable to form beliefs that fall short of knowledge. What we want, Feldman argues, is rationality; we want beliefs that would lead to knowledge and truth in ideal conditions. The aim of belief is to maximize epistemic value; correct beliefs are not true ones but rational ones. Feldman’s principle of epistemic value is as follows: “When adopting (or maintaining) an attitude toward a proposition, p, a person maximizes epistemic value by adopting (or maintaining) a rational attitude toward p.” And it is rational to follow the evidence.

This kind of evidentialism is getting closer to Hume’s view. We have seen that Hume thinks that beliefs formed according to the “more general and authentic operations of the understanding” are the “wise” ones. The “vulgar,” however, will form beliefs in accordance with the more “capricious and uncertain” principles of the imagination” which will lead them into all kinds of errors. “Wise” and “vulgar” could be roughly equivalent to “rational” and “irrational,” especially since the wise follow the rules of proper reasoning. But, of course, we know that both just and fallacious reasoning have no rational basis for Hume and, instead, are the product of custom and the operations of the imagination. Why some operations of the imagination are more legitimate than others is a tricky question for Hume, but he does not have recourse to the language of rationality. Feldman’s answer to the question of why ought we follow the evidence in forming beliefs is that will “maximize epistemic value.” And it seems Hume might well agree with this. The problem, of course, is that if one were to always follow evidence, one may maximize epistemic value but end up with no beliefs at all. Epistemic value is only one value but not necessarily the one that is, ultimately, most important. This is one of the lessons of Book One of the *Treatise*.

Hume differs from most contemporary evidentialists because he thinks not all beliefs

⁹ Ibid.: 685

are to be evaluated within this system of norms. The reason why we want our beliefs, in general, to follow evidence is because doing so has great practical value. In a discussion of epistemic norms, Hilary Kornblith asks what gives them their normative force.¹⁰ He concludes that for them to have the force they do, they must be grounded in some universal desire. He recognizes, however, that no desire or goal one posits (truth, knowledge, rationality) will be sufficiently universal, and we would thus have different norms depending on our desires. “Human beings are a very diverse lot; some of us are quite strange. It is hard to imagine making a plausible case for any particular goal or activity which is genuinely universally valued.”¹¹

Kornblith’s view is that we all, that is anyone who has any goals at all, has a reason to favor a cognitive system which is effective in generating truths. So we should care about beliefs being justified or reasonable because these are the norms which, in general, will help to make us happier. So any one with any goals must care about their beliefs being true. The reasons I care about truth are ultimately pragmatic reasons: “I have argued that epistemic evaluation finds its natural ground in our desires in a way which makes truth something we should care about whatever else we may value. This provides us with a pragmatic account of the source of normativity, but an account which is universal and allows truth to play a central role.”¹²

Kornblith is somewhat dissatisfied with his conclusion. He says if someone could give substance to an account that made the value of truth intrinsic and the injunction to seek truth categorical he “would not be hostile to such an account” but cannot see how it can be done. But I think Hume would think it is important to acknowledge that truth and knowledge are sub-goals; they are instrumental, not intrinsic goods, and so the possibility is left open that they can be trumped by other norms or goals. If the purpose of belief is to help us achieve our goals, flourish, and be excellent human beings, it is possible that some beliefs can do this independently of their truth-value, or of their being evidentially-based. For Hume, this is so with some of our most fundamental beliefs; we have no evidence for them but we should maintain them nonetheless. Some argue that Hume’s view of such fundamental beliefs as committing him to a kind of foundationalism where

¹⁰ Hilary Kornblith, “Epistemic Normativity” *Synthese* 94 (1993): 357—376.

¹¹ Kornblith: 367

¹² *Ibid.*, 373.

these beliefs are seen as basic, as providing justification for higher order beliefs but not needing justification themselves; some describe them as self-justified. It is important to realize that, for Hume, these beliefs do not have any epistemic warrant. Hume's scepticism is characterized by his acceptance that we lack ultimate justification for our practices of common life. For Hume we are finished with justification when we reach original principles of human nature -- features of our nature that help to explain other judgments and behaviour but are, themselves, inexplicable. We can give no reason, he says, for "our most general and refined principles, besides our experience of their reality" (T xviii). But the certainty we feel say, about the future resembling the past is not justified. The confidence we have in these beliefs is captured in the following a remark by Wittgenstein; it is "something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified, as it were, as something animal" (OC 359).

2. Passivity

One of the defenses of a kind of evidentialism, one that Adler uses for example, is to appeal to belief's involuntary character. We cannot choose to believe something because it would make us feel better. Adler points out that because the action guiding aspect of belief would be severely undermined if we could believe at will, we should not even want this kind of control. He says, "If belief is responsive to us it is responsive to the wrong object."¹³ The problem is if we know that beliefs can result from willing then we will not trust that our beliefs could reliably guide our actions. He admits that there may be times when I do not yet have a belief and then I "make up my mind" and judge something true (thus issuing in full belief) even when no new evidence has been added. What we decide to do is to end inquiry and, according to Adler, belief occurs when inquiry ends; so what I am doing, he says, is "not deciding to believe; rather, I am deciding to place myself in a position where I will come to believe."¹⁴ Belief, therefore, remains passive and non-voluntary.

Hume is appealed to as one who supports this passive view of belief. For example, David Owens characterizes Hume's position in the following way: "In denying the existence of epistemic agency, doxastic responsibility and intellectual freedom, Hume

¹³ Adler: 57.

¹⁴ Adler: 61.

means to reject the idea that belief is subject to reason. He allows that beliefs are governed by the sort of biological norms that apply to the process of breathing, or the workings of the human heart but no one thinks us responsible for non-compliance with such norms.”¹⁵ We can see how Hume’s mechanistic theory of belief formation could support such a reading. He tells us that beliefs are ideas that, as a result of certain natural mechanisms of the mind, become particularly lively and vivacious. Such an account seems to allow us little control over which beliefs we acquire, maintain or eschew. It seems I could not avoid feeling the strength of such ideas any more than I could avoid feeling the strength of the sun when exposed to it. Here is one of Hume’s descriptions of belief’s involuntary nature:

it follows, therefore, that the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature, like all other sentiments, and must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture. (5.2.11)

He also says that all probable reasoning and the beliefs which accompany such reasoning are “nothing but a species of sensation.” And so it follows, he says, “’tis not only solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy...When I give preference to one set of arguments over another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence.” (1.3.8.12). Further, he says, “*belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.*” (1.4.1.8) One way in which beliefs can be distinguished from impressions of sensation is that beliefs can be evaluated in a system of norms while sense impressions cannot. Why can sense impressions not be so evaluated? One reason seems to be that we are too passive in their formation. But if we are also passive in the formation of belief it seems this poses a problem for beliefs being norm-governed and open to assessment. We have already seen how it is possible to correct beliefs through the acceptance of certain general rules. But even if we accept that there is a way for Hume to resolve the seeming tension between his normative assessment of beliefs on the one hand,

¹⁵ David Owens *Reason Without Freedom: The Problem of Epistemic Normativity* (London,, Routledge, 2000): 2.

and the mechanistic story of belief formation which allows us little control on the other, a further question arises.¹⁶

We have seen that Hume calls belief a sentiment, and a feeling. And yet it can be evaluated in a system of norms. Can other sentiments or feelings be so evaluated? I think impressions of reflection and moral sentiments can and so beliefs might resemble those kind of impressions more than they do impressions of sensation or memories. Consider the passion of pride. Hume spends a considerable amount of time trying to explain how it is that so many different kinds of thing can cause one to feel proud or humble. He discovers that what all the causes of pride have in common is that they all provide a pleasant sensation and are related to one's self, which is the object of pride. He says, "Any thing, that gives a pleasant sensation, and is related to self, excites the passion of pride, which is also agreeable and has self for its object" (2.1.5.8). The pleasant feeling of, say, witnessing beauty, when related to the idea of myself, produces the feeling of pride. Hume likens this account of pride to his account of belief. In both cases a present impression related to an idea produces a new kind of impression: "Without the present impression, the attention is not fix'd, nor the spirits excited. Without the relation, this attention rests on its first object, and has no farther consequence." (2.1.5.11)

As is the case with belief-formation, the description of pride-production is a mechanistic story using Hume's limited elements of the mental world, namely impressions, ideas and relations. It seems, nonetheless, possible for me to criticize you for having pride in certain contexts just as you ought not to maintain a certain belief. Just as reliance on general rules can lead to prejudices and erroneous beliefs, so can such reliance lead one to have improper pride. For example, a certain kind of pride in country may have originally been grounded in a pleasant feeling upon the contemplation of one's country's virtues. But it seems this pride can continue even as the country engages in acts and practices that excite unpleasant feelings. "My country right or wrong" exemplifies this kind of misplaced pride.

Now one may say in both the example of pride and belief, it is not the feeling itself that one is being blamed for, but, for certain kinds of mistaken judgments that accompany or give rise to the feelings. What is important to realize, for Hume is that this neat

¹⁶ I further discuss how this tension can be resolved in "Why Should We Be Wise," *Hume Studies*, Vo. 31, no 1, April 2005, pp.3-19.

distinction between what philosophers may call cognitive states and conative states does not exist. Our reasoning is a species of sensation and our feelings contain judgments. Only sense impressions constitute pure feeling and the only kind of pure cognition is theoretical reasoning.

I want to close with a brief discussion of the problem of disagreement. On Hume's view, any claim one makes which reports a belief will be a statement about how an idea *feels*, that it has a lively, vivacious feeling. All stated beliefs are reports of this kind. One problem for Hume's is that if these are just subjective reports, then contradiction or genuine disagreement seems impossible. This seems like a generalized version of the problem that arises with the possibility of moral disagreement. And so it seems it can be addressed the same way one addresses the possibility of disagreement in the moral realm. We know that for Hume moral distinctions are not derived from reason. "Morality," he says "is more properly felt than judg'd of... To have a sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of particular kind from the contemplation of a character." (3.1.2.1-3). But it is a very particular kind of sentiment: "'Tis only when a character is consider'd in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil," (3.1.2.4) It is easy to see how such an account will allow for argument and disagreement. I may pronounce someone vicious but then you can point out aspects of his circumstances or character that I have overlooked and my recognition of them will change my feeling. Hume makes it clear how moral argument is possible in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*:

I am apt to suspect..that *reason* and *sentiment* concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions..the final sentence depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species..But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. (1.9)

A similar kind of disagreement and correction can occur in beliefs in matters of fact, the causal beliefs that are Hume's central concern in *Treatise* 1.3. Belief is a feeling but it is a feeling that will only arise in certain contexts. If you bring certain neglected

considerations to my attention, these can result in impression that can change the force of the idea I am entertaining and I can cease to have the belief. So if you deny my claim that the movie we watched last night was so boring that it put me to sleep, at first we may have nothing to say. But if you bring to my attention the fact that you had slipped a sleeping pill into my drink, this information will lead to impressions that can diminish the vivacity of my idea of the connection between the movie and sleep. So we have contradictory feelings but we can interact with one another in ways that can get us to see things differently and so change our feelings and our minds.

Both Corliss and Saul want to emphasize aspects of Hume's view of belief other than its feeling-aspect. Though I agree that Hume's account of belief is diminished if we ignore some of these other aspects, I think it is also important to investigate what the sentiment of belief has in common with other sentiments. I think it is important to see that for Hume beliefs do not simply result from the way the world impinges on us, or what the evidence dictates to us. Like other sentiments, their coming and going will depend also on our own psychology and how they interact with other aspects of our world, both external and internal.