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# *The Philosophical Quarterly*

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## CAN WE INFER NATURALISM FROM SCEPTICISM?

BY WARD E. JONES

In a number of passages, Hume suggests that he takes scepticism to provide support for naturalism. In *Treatise* I iii 6 (my italics), he writes

Reason can never shew us the connexion of one object with another, tho' aided by experience, and the observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances. When the mind, *therefore*, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination.

And later, in the first *Enquiry*, v i (my italics),

The conclusions which [reason] draws from considering one circle are the same which it would form upon surveying all the circles in the universe. But no man, having seen only one body move after being impelled by another, could infer that every other body will move after a like impulse. All inferences from experience, *therefore*, are effects of custom, not of reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

Because our beliefs in unobserved facts are ultimately unjustifiable, Hume claims, the right account of why we hold them must be naturalistic. Robert Fogelin goes so far as to claim

This, I believe, is the central argument of book I part iii. What we now call Hume's scepticism concerning induction, for all its independent importance, occurs as a step leading to the conclusion that causal inferences (so called) are the product of the imagination and not of any kind of reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford UP, 1978), p. 92, and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford UP, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> R. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 56.

Hume takes his (negative sceptical) claims about the epistemic status of our beliefs to justify his (positive naturalistic) claims about why we hold those beliefs. This paper is an attempt to justify this inference. My claims will be neither exegetical nor interpretative; the argument I outline is not a reconstruction of Hume's own thinking on the matter. Indeed, I should admit that I have no idea why Hume himself thought that this inference was a good one to make. Rather I pursue a strategy that, though not found in Hume, is a promising one for formulating a justified argument from scepticism to naturalism. I shall not, I am afraid, ultimately succeed in achieving my goal. The argument at which I eventually arrive is, I shall argue, not justified.

### I. SCEPTICAL AND NATURALIST THESES

I shall call a 'sceptical thesis' any statement that says that some set of beliefs or possible beliefs is epistemically unjustified or unjustifiable. Most of them, including Hume's, can be put into the following form:

For each proposition in some group  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_n$  there is another group of propositions  $q_1, q_2, q_3, \dots, q_n$  such that the  $p_i$  and  $q_i$  are incompatible, and yet  $q_i$  is as well supported by whatever evidence there is for  $p_i$ . Therefore for each member in the  $p$ -set we have no more reason to believe that it is true than we have to believe that the analogous member in the  $q$ -set is true.<sup>3</sup>

Sceptical theses tell us that there exist two incompatible sets of propositions, both of which are equally well supported. Given our evidence, we have no reason to believe that the  $q$ -set is not correct. Sceptical theses which can be put in this way are often referred to as 'underdetermination theses': the fact that there is a  $q$ -set which is just as well supported as the  $p$ -set shows that both sets are 'underdetermined' by the evidence. Therefore belief in members of the  $p$ -set will be no more justified than belief in analogous members of the  $q$ -set. (I am not thinking here of *weak* versions of the underdetermination thesis,<sup>4</sup> those which claim only that for any body of data there

<sup>3</sup> Some sceptical theses, like the 'paradox of the raven' in C. Hempel and P. Oppenheim, 'Studies in the Logic of Confirmation' (1945), reprinted in Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 3–46, and the scepticism defended in P. Unger, *Ignorance* (Oxford UP, 1975), may not be expressible in this form.

<sup>4</sup> For the distinction, see L. Laudan, 'Demystifying Underdetermination', in C.W. Savage (ed.), *Scientific Theories, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. xiv (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 267–97; or S. Okasha, 'The Underdetermination of Theory by Data and the "Strong Programme" in the Sociology of Knowledge', forthcoming in *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*.

exist two incompatible theories both of which are *consistent* with that body of data. I am thinking of stronger versions, which claim that for any body of data there exist two incompatible theories both of which are equally well supported by that body of data.) In short, in this paper the sceptical claim that belief in some proposition is *unjustified* should be taken to mean that it is *no more justified than belief in an incompatible proposition*.

The propositions in the *p*-set are the 'target' propositions of the sceptical thesis. They are the propositions that the sceptical thesis says are unjustified or unjustifiable. A sceptical thesis does not have to target propositions which anyone actually believes, but it is only when they do this that sceptical theses have any real importance to us. A scepticism that targets propositions which no one believes would generate none of the epistemic and doxastic unease which makes sceptical arguments important.

The Humean inference that I shall be discussing depends upon a sceptical thesis that targets propositions we believe. This inference says that if some sceptical thesis targeting a set of propositions that are beliefs of ours is true, then our holding those beliefs is to be 'naturalistically' explained. This is the thesis of 'Humean naturalism', the core of which is the following claim:

The correct explanation of our believing some body of propositions (i.e., those targeted by a sceptical thesis) is non-epistemic.

Non-epistemic determinants are those that are not indicative of the truth of a given proposition. If *S* believes that it will be sunny tomorrow, and his believing this is determined by his desire to have a picnic, then this will be a *non-epistemically determined belief* (i.e., to be non-epistemically explained). This is because *S*'s desires are not good indicators of the truth-value of propositions about tomorrow's weather. (There are possible exceptions: if *S* is God, then his desires may be reliable indicators of tomorrow's weather.) On the other hand, if *S*'s believing that it will be sunny tomorrow is determined by his watching the evening weather report, then his belief is *epistemically* determined (i.e., to be epistemically explained). This is because a meteorologist's claims tend to be reliably correlated with tomorrow's weather.

The Humean naturalist says that scepticism shows us that what we take to be non-epistemic determinants are responsible for our holding the beliefs which that scepticism targets. Precisely what these non-epistemic determinants are claimed to be will vary from naturalist to naturalist. Hume himself claims (*Enquiry* v ii, p. 55) that all of our beliefs about the unobserved are determined by custom and the associationist nature of the mind. They are, ultimately, to be explained by citing the causal effect of repeated experiences on the mind, along with 'the wisdom of nature':

It is more comfortable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency.

According to Hume, I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, not because the past gives me any reason to believe that it will rise tomorrow, but because my mind is naturally such that a present experience will result in my believing that the sun will rise tomorrow.

This is more clearly true of Hume's account of our beliefs in the external world (*Treatise* I iv 2), where he concludes that the imagination 'is seduc'd into' the opinion that the objects of perception are the same after an interruption of observation. The imagination 'produces the fiction of a continu'd existence', given merely resembling perceptions. And near the end of that section (p. 217), he writes

I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou'd be the conclusion, I shou'd draw from the whole of my reasoning. But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system.

Our beliefs about the unobserved, as well as our beliefs about the existence of persisting objects, are to be explained by introducing the effect of ideas on the imagination. The process is thoroughly and merely causal, and, if it is rational at all, it is *pragmatically* and not epistemically so. 'Nature', he summarizes, 'by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel'. And it is scepticism, Hume says, which has told us that this is so.

Modern Humean naturalists have some prominence in the philosophy of science. They forward non-epistemic accounts of theory acceptance which differ from Hume's own, tending to make reference to scientists' social position, culture or self-interest. Like Hume, however, they appeal to sceptical theses. Mary Hesse writes that

Quine points out that scientific theories are never logically determined by data, and that there are consequently always in principle alternative theories that fit the data more or less adequately ... it is only a short step from this philosophy of science to the suggestion that [theory acceptance] should be explicable by social rather than logical factors.

Similarly, Ernan McMullin writes that 'values are needed to close the gap between underdetermined theory and the evidence ... presumably all sorts of values can slip in: political, moral, social, religious'. And the sociologists of science Barry Barnes, David Bloor and John Henry have recently written

that 'for a given body of experimental results there will be more than one theory that could explain them ... the preferred theory is selected because it is salient in the local culture'.<sup>5</sup>

## II. THE NEED FOR FURTHER PREMISES

No sceptical thesis *entails* Humean naturalism. A sceptical thesis that targets a proposition  $p$  only tells us that the belief that  $p$  is no more justified than belief in an alternative proposition. It is an epistemic and not a psychological claim.

Many beliefs are evidentially, and thus epistemically, determined even though they are unjustified. Here is an example: Mr Violet believes that his favourite band will be playing in town next week because he has seen advertisements posted all over town; he is not aware, however, of a local newspaper article alleging that all these signs are hoaxes. Although we may be tempted to call Mr Violet's belief *unjustified* because there is strong counter-evidence against it, we should not hesitate to agree that his belief is *evidentially based*. Mr Violet believes that his favourite band is in town because he has seen posters, and that is a clear instance of what he takes to be evidence for a proposition  $p$  determining his belief that  $p$ . So no matter what else we know about the epistemic situation, we cannot but agree that Mr Violet's belief is to be epistemically explained.

Thus there is a distinction between (i) offering an epistemic explanation of Mr Violet's belief, and (ii) taking Mr Violet's belief to be epistemically justified. If someone else knows that the posters are hoaxes, he may disagree with (ii); he may be sceptical about Mr Violet's belief. But this is just to say that Mr Violet's belief is based on inadequate evidence, and not to say that it is not based on evidence at all. If I accept a sceptical thesis against a proposition  $p$ , then I shall not endorse it, but that does not mean that I should deny that someone's belief that  $p$  is to be epistemically explained.

We can try this with Cartesian scepticism: according to Descartes,<sup>6</sup> the fact that there is an alternative proposition ('I am dreaming that there is a computer in front of me') which is as justified as the one I hold ('There is a

<sup>5</sup> M. Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 33; E. McMullin, 'Values in Science', in P.D. Asquith and T. Nickles (eds), *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Science Association*, 1982 (East Lansing: Philosophy of Science Association, 1982), pp. 18–19; B. Barnes, D. Bloor and J. Henry, *Scientific Knowledge: a Sociological Approach* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 27. For a discussion of this inference in the philosophy of science, see the final section of Laudan; and Okasha.

<sup>6</sup> To be more careful, this is according to Barry Stroud's Cartesian scepticism: see his *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford UP, 1984). ch. 1.

computer in front of me') entails that I have no reason to believe what I do. Nevertheless, if I have never read Descartes, or if I do not accept that the alternative dream proposition is equally justified, then my belief may be completely justified by my own lights. And if it is justified by my own lights, *then it is to be epistemically explained*. It is to be explained in terms of my other beliefs (or in terms of perception) and the support those give to my belief that there is a computer in front of me.

To bring the point back to Humean scepticism, if Humean scepticism is right, then any case of inductive reasoning is a case of circular reasoning. But that is not to deny that we are *reasoning*. When we point out that someone's belief is based on a circular argument, we do not have reason to deny that it is an argument, nor do we have reason to deny that the argument was the basis for the belief. The fact that a *Humean sceptic* thinks that no one has any reason to believe anything about unobserved facts, or about the external world, shows nothing about the right explanation for anyone's beliefs (other than the sceptic's own: see the next section below). This is because the believer may not himself be a Humean sceptic. If I think, *pace* Hume, that I do have reason to believe that *p*, then my believing that *p* should be epistemically explained. Probably it should be explained in terms of other beliefs that I have, those that I think count in *p*'s favour. No one can rightly claim that my belief deserves a non-epistemic explanation simply because *there exists* a sceptical thesis, Humean or otherwise, targeting it.

I believe that an unsuspected object near the earth will fall. Hume tells me that my belief is unjustified. It is nevertheless possible that my belief is based on evidence. Indeed, my belief might very well be based on my further belief in what Hume calls the 'principle of the uniformity of nature', the claim that natural events will continue in roughly the same way as I have observed them to in the past. If so, then my belief about the behaviour of an unsuspected object will be derivable from a generalization that I believe. Therefore it is based on a *reason*, and is to be epistemically explained. If I believe that *p* because I have deduced *p* from another belief I hold, then the right explanation for my belief that *p* will not be non-epistemic. This is a prime case of evidential believing.

Now Hume says that the generalization upon which I have based my belief that an unsuspected object will fall (i.e., the principle of the uniformity of nature) is baseless, and so my reason for believing what I do is a bad reason. But that is not to say that it is not a reason at all. That there is no *good* reason for a belief about the unobserved does not entail that I do not hold such a belief for what *I take to be* a good reason. If Hume is right, my reason will be a bad one, but it will still be a reason none the less. In short, the existence of a regress of justification does not mean that we have to turn

to non-epistemic explanations in order to explain why we believe what we do about the unobserved. Thus by itself Hume's sceptical claim says nothing about the right explanation for my beliefs about the unobserved.<sup>7</sup>

### III. NARROW SCEPTICAL THESES AND 'THE *IDÉE FIXE* INFERENCE'

If the previous section is correct, then neither Humean scepticism nor any other sceptical thesis alone gives us reason to believe in Humean naturalism. This is, as we saw, because the believer himself may not accept the sceptical thesis that targets the propositions he believes. However, what if the believer *does* accept that there is an equally well supported body of propositions which are incompatible with the ones he believes? In this section I shall argue that under these circumstances we can make the inference from scepticism to non-epistemic determination of someone's belief.

Sceptical theses vary greatly in their scope. Global or wide-scoped sceptical theses say that every member of some large set or entire type of proposition is underdetermined. Conversely, narrow sceptical theses say that some small set of propositions is underdetermined. Most narrowly, a sceptical thesis says that one particular proposition or belief is unjustified. Mr Violet believes that a concert will take place tonight because of some posters he has seen. Suppose, however, that on the day of the concert Ms Magenta tells him that she has just read in the local newspaper that the signs advertising this particular concert are hoaxes. Taking Ms Magenta and the local papers to be fairly trustworthy, Mr Violet takes the proposition that there will not be a concert tonight to be well supported. As a result of the discussion with her, he phones the venue of the supposed concert.

Ms Magenta's claim is, in relation to the proposition Mr Violet believes, a sceptical thesis. She has stated and supported a proposition which is incompatible with the proposition that there will be a concert tonight. The negation of the proposition that Mr Violet believes is, according to Ms Magenta, well supported. It need not be true that she *intends* her claim to be a sceptical thesis. Sceptical theses are not a species of speech act, and what is more, she might not have known that he believed the negation of what she was reporting. Nevertheless, as Ms Magenta defends a proposition incompatible with the one Mr Violet believes, then her statement can be seen as a sceptical thesis with relation to the proposition that there will be a concert.

<sup>7</sup> I develop a more extensive version of this argument in my 'Underdetermination and the Explanation of Theory-acceptance: a Reply to Samir Okasha', forthcoming in *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*.



Furthermore, it is clear from this scenario that Mr Violet appreciates her claim as a sceptical challenge. Mr Violet thinks that Ms Magenta is being sincere, and he thinks that the local newspapers are trustworthy. Thus Mr Violet becomes aware of a proposition (e.g., that there will not be a concert tonight) which he takes to be both well supported and incompatible with the proposition he believes (e.g., that there will be a concert tonight). In other words, he accepts Ms Magenta's statement as a sceptical challenge to the proposition he believes. The notion of *appreciating* or *accepting* a sceptical thesis is important.

*S appreciates* a sceptical thesis if *S* believes that for some *p*-set of propositions that *S* believes, there is an alternative and incompatible set of propositions which is equally justified by the evidence *S* has for that *p*-set.

Mr Violet need not have appreciated Ms Magenta's claim. He might have thought she was joking, or he might have had a general distrust of local newspapers. Nevertheless he trusts both Ms Magenta and the local papers, and as a consequence he has begun to doubt his belief that there will be a concert tonight; and he shows this by phoning the concert venue and seeking further evidence for or against the giving of the concert. Mr Violet's acceptance of Ms Magenta's sceptical thesis has affected his belief; his conviction has diminished.

In his response to Ms Magenta's claims, Mr Violet behaves like a typical believer, and his belief behaves like typical beliefs. Sceptical theses tell us that there are well supported propositions incompatible with those we believe, and when we appreciate and believe evidence for positions incompatible with our own, our original beliefs are affected. We may believe them less strongly, or no longer believe them at all. We may search out ways of discovering whether our original beliefs, or the newly suggested alternatives, are right. In short, human beliefs tend to behave like Mr Violet's belief, in that they are negatively affected by appreciated sceptical theses.

I doubt whether we could state with any precision the nature and extent of our tendency to respond to sceptical theses. Nor do I want to overstate this tendency; to do so would be to fly in the face of (to cite just one example) the empirically documented phenomenon known as 'the perseverance effect'. In a number of studies, subjects who were given strong evidence for some proposition, and subsequently believed it, did not completely give up their new belief when the experimenter later revealed that the evidence they had been given was faked.<sup>8</sup> While their beliefs were affected by the

<sup>8</sup> See R. Nisbett and L. Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgement* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

experimenter's admission, they persevered in their conviction to an extent that is surprising given the fact that the evidence was completely retracted.

Nevertheless, the fact that there *is* such a tendency in human believing should be uncontroversial. It is hard to imagine what our doxastic lives would be like if we did not in general respond to what we saw as cogent sceptical theses. Seeing other people as susceptible to counter-testimony thoroughly shapes how we interact with them. If we thought that other people's beliefs did not respond to counter-evidence, we would not present evidence to them in order to get them to change their beliefs. Furthermore, if we did not think the same of ourselves, it is hard to see that anything like investigation would be possible. It is a condition of my being able to set out to investigate anything that I see my beliefs as being susceptible to counter-evidence which would disconfirm them. Whatever is the best description of this tendency, there should be no doubt that this is a human tendency. Like other 'folk psychological laws', it is no more than a rough generalization, but it nevertheless lies deeply in our understanding of each other and of ourselves.

However, this tendency leaves open the possibility that one of my beliefs will not be responsive to sceptical theses targeting it, even if I appreciate that sceptical challenge. That is, it is possible that some of my beliefs will not weaken in the face of challenges that I think may be correct. If there were such beliefs (and I do not need to claim that there are), then they would be what I shall call '*idées fixes*':

An *idée fixe* is any belief that does not diminish even if, on my own assessment of it, it is no more justified than an incompatible alternative.

An *idée fixe* is believed even though the believer appreciates that there is an undefeated sceptical thesis targeting that belief. Mr Violet's belief that there is going to be a concert tonight would have been an *idée fixe* if it had not responded to his appreciation of Ms Magenta's challenge.

The most important feature of *idées fixes*, for my purposes, is that the right explanation of why someone holds an *idée fixe* will be non-epistemic. The reason for this is that *idées fixes* are by definition not susceptible to the believer's own scrutiny. The only tool I have at my disposal for assessing my own beliefs is consistency or coherence with the rest of my beliefs. This does not mean that I cannot set out to investigate, by seeking further testimony or observation. But how a belief holds up to investigation is something which itself depends upon the beliefs I gain or lose during the process. For me to assess one of my own beliefs epistemically is for me to fit that belief into the rest of my belief system. If the belief is supported by other beliefs, then it is, by my lights, justified. If it is not, however, then that belief is lacking in

justification by my lights. It follows that an *idée fixe*, a belief I accept in spite of my accepting a sceptical thesis against it, is *independent* of my assessment of it. It is indeed apparently wholly independent of the rest of my belief system. If I believe a sceptical challenge, then I *believe* that there is an equally well supported proposition incompatible with the one I believe. So a belief which is not affected by a sceptical thesis does not depend upon consistency with the rest of my beliefs. *Idées fixes* depend upon something other than my own epistemic estimation of them; they are thus to be explained non-epistemically. This is the '*idée fixe* inference': if *S*'s believing that *p* is an *idée fixe*, then the correct explanation of *S*'s believing that *p* is non-epistemic.

In the previous section, I argued that scepticism would only support non-epistemic claims about beliefs with the help of extra propositions. We now have them. Here is an argument from a narrow sceptical thesis to a non-epistemic explanation of a subject's belief in the proposition that the sceptical thesis targets:

- (i) *S* believes that *p*
- (ii) There exists a sceptical thesis that targets *p*
- (iii) *S* appreciates this sceptical thesis
- (iv) *S*'s belief that *p* is not weakened by his appreciation of this sceptical thesis
- (v) Therefore *S*'s belief that *p* is an *idée fixe* [from (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv) by the definition of an '*idée fixe*']
- (vi) *S*'s belief is to be non-epistemically explained [the '*idée fixe* inference, from (v)].

This inference looks good because there is a tendency for believers to give up beliefs in the face of scepticism. If there is a sceptical thesis targeting *S*'s belief, and if it is clear that *S*'s belief would not diminish even if *S* were to believe my sceptical thesis, then I have reason to believe that *S*'s beliefs are not dependent upon *S*'s own assessment of them. Given these further conditions, we can conclude that a belief targeted by an accepted sceptical thesis is non-epistemically determined. The question now is whether we can defend this inference, on the Humean naturalist's behalf, from a wider-scope sceptical thesis like Hume's own.

#### IV. WIDER SCEPTICAL THESES, AND THEIR EFFECT ON BELIEF

What I have called *idées fixes* may exist, but they are surely very much the exception to the rule. For the most part, we think, our beliefs will tend to respond appropriately to a narrow sceptical challenge. When someone offers

and supports a proposition alternative to the one I believe, and I believe that the offered proposition is well supported, then I tend to become less convinced, or not convinced at all, of my original belief. This is just the 'psychological tendency' I described in the previous section: our beliefs respond negatively to narrow sceptical theses.

Is the same true of wider-scoped sceptical theses? In this section, I shall suggest that we have every reason to think that it ought to be, for wide-scoped sceptical theses are merely narrow-scoped theses made general.

Wide-scoped sceptical theses include those global theses that have occupied philosophers for centuries: Hume's various sceptical arguments and Cartesian scepticism are prime examples. There are global sceptical theses as well of more recent invention: Bas van Fraassen has recently defended a scepticism about unobservables; and while Nelson Goodman was not himself a sceptic, his 'new riddle of induction' readily lends itself to a serious sceptical argument.<sup>9</sup> All of these are sceptical theses that attack not particular beliefs but whole types of beliefs. Each of them claims that for any belief we have of a certain type there will be an incompatible and equally well supported alternative to the one we in fact believe.

Descartes', van Fraassen's and 'Goodmanian' sceptical arguments all take this form quite explicitly. Descartes' sceptical thesis about empirical beliefs says that for any proposition that I come to believe about the external world, it could be that I am merely dreaming that this proposition is true. Even though I believe that I am sitting at my computer, Descartes asserts that I have no way of epistemically eliminating the alternative proposition 'I am dreaming that I am sitting at my computer'. Van Fraassen's sceptical thesis is explicitly stated in the same form. He says that for each set of propositions about unobservable entities, there is another set of propositions which is incompatible and yet equally supported, and he introduces this other set by examples. If construed as a sceptical argument, Goodman's 'new riddle of induction' targets propositions about the unobserved, introducing an alternative set of propositions that embody a new predicate. Goodman sets up his riddle by example. Were we to use appropriately different colour concepts in our observations of emeralds, all our observations of emeralds would support not the claim 'The next discovered emerald will be green', but the claim 'The next discovered emerald will be blue'. We would make the latter prediction, Goodman says, were we to describe emeralds not as green but as 'grue', where  $x$  is grue if it looks green if it is first discovered

<sup>9</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, First Meditation; Hume, *Treatise* 1 iv and *Enquiry* 1; Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford UP, 1984), ch. 1; B. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford UP, 1980), chs 3 and 4; N. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (Harvard UP, 1979), §III (he endorses his own solution to his 'new riddle' in §IV).

before time  $t$  and looks blue if it is first discovered after time  $t$ . The Goodmanian sceptic argues that given the lack of apparent justification for the choice of one predicate (e.g., 'green') over the other (e.g., 'grue'), we have no more reason, at any time  $t$ , to believe the prediction 'the next emerald discovered will be green' than to believe the prediction 'the next emerald discovered will be blue'. Then, taking a cue from Goodman himself (p. 74), the Goodmanian sceptic will generalize this example to *every* statement about the unobserved:

Moreover, it is clear that if we simply choose an appropriate predicate, then on the basis of these same observations we shall have equal confirmation ... for any prediction whatever about other emeralds – or indeed about anything else.

Like Descartes, Goodman can be taken as introducing a 'sceptical formula' for generating particular alternatives to the propositions we are inclined to believe. Sceptical formulae tell us how we can generate an alternative equally supported proposition for any statement about the unobserved. Hume's argument against knowledge of the unobserved does not follow this form, but the end result is the same. Because of the very nature of evidential support for propositions about the unobserved, we have no more reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow than that it will not.

Wide-scoped sceptical theses like these should be seen as mere extensions of narrow sceptical theses. Global sceptical challenges are only particular challenges made universal. Each of the sceptical theses above is only the claim that a narrow scepticism holds across some vast range of our beliefs. As Stroud writes, the condition on knowledge which Cartesian scepticism requires is that '*every* piece of knowledge that goes beyond one's sensory experiences requires that one know one is not dreaming'.<sup>10</sup> Cartesian scepticism is a radical or global scepticism only because for each belief we have about the world, it is not true that we have reason to believe that we are not dreaming. The same is true of Hume's scepticism about the unobserved. His global scepticism about the unobserved just says that each belief about the unobserved cannot be justified, for the generalization(s) which must do the work of justifying them are themselves ungrounded.

This is not to say that every narrow sceptical argument is generalizable into a global sceptical argument. It is at least possible that some narrow sceptical challenges cannot be generalized to any propositions other than the one each in fact targets. My claim is, however, that the converse is true. Any global scepticism can be conceived as the conjunct of a (perhaps infinite) set of narrow sceptical claims. Global scepticism is merely the phenomenon of narrow scepticism made general.

<sup>10</sup> *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, p. 22; my italics.

For precisely this reason, it would appear that any accepted wide-scoped sceptical challenge *should* weaken the beliefs it targets in the same way as an accepted narrow sceptical claim does. Ancient sceptics appear to have used sceptical formulae for the very purpose of loosening doxastic commitment. Early in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus writes

Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought first to a state of mental suspense [ἐποχή] and next to a state of unperturbedness or quietude [ἀταραξία].<sup>11</sup>

And it seems that at least some wide-scoped sceptical theses would, if accepted, bring us to a state of ἐποχή. As I understand him, in *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen wields his sceptical thesis with the sole purpose of bringing about a suspension of belief with respect to theories about unobservables. Rather than believe that such theories are true, he says, we should adopt the epistemic attitude he calls ‘acceptance’. If one *accepts* (in van Fraassen’s sense) a theory about unobservables, one believes that its entailments will be consistent with observation, even though one does not believe that the theory is true. Van Fraassen’s goal of diminishing our conviction about theories about unobservables is by no means impossible to fulfil. Upon reading van Fraassen, it is possible that as a scientist Dr Plum will respond to his sceptical thesis by losing her beliefs in unobservable entities, and perhaps even take on his safer intentional attitude of acceptance.

Indeed, it seems that if Dr Plum were to accept van Fraassen’s sceptical thesis about unobservables, then most probably her convictions about the nature of unobservables just *would* diminish. There is no reason to think that we could not easily give up our beliefs in unobservables. This is, of course, exactly the phenomenon described in the previous section. If a typical believer is convinced that all theories that refer to unobservables are underdetermined, then his confidence in each of those theories will be shaken. If Dr Plum is a typical believer, and if her beliefs about unobservable entities are typical beliefs, then it would seem that her beliefs about unobservable entities would weaken in the face of van Fraassen’s sceptical challenge, in the same way as Mr Violet’s do in the face of Ms Magenta’s local sceptical challenge.

What is true of van Fraassen’s scepticism about unobservables, however, is not obviously true of other sceptical theses. Descartes thought that the wide-scoped sceptical theses he forwards in the first Meditation would not affect his readers’ beliefs: ‘My habitual opinions keep coming back, and,

<sup>11</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R.G. Bury (London: Heinemann, 1933), 18.

despite my wishes, they capture my belief'.<sup>12</sup> Once we see this, we understand why Descartes dedicates a good deal of space at the end of the first Meditation to making it clear that he wants his readers merely to 'pretend' to disbelieve what they really believe. Passages in which Descartes speaks of 'withholding assent' and 'doubting' are to be given a metaphorical interpretation. Descartes' doubt is, as we all know, something nearer to what Bernard Williams calls 'philosophical doubt'.<sup>13</sup> Hume thought the same, noticing (*Treatise* I iv 7, p. 269) that in spite of his acceptance of his own sceptical theses, 'I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life'. While it is the norm for us to give up particular beliefs in the face of narrow sceptical challenges, and while, given van Fraassen's scepticism, it is possible for larger tracts of beliefs to weaken in the face of wider-scoped challenges, it does not seem to be possible for us to respond to Descartes', Hume's or Goodman's sceptical theses by giving up our beliefs about the external world or unobserved facts.

#### V. THE INFERENCE FROM SCEPTICISM TO NON-EPISTEMIC EXPLANATION

In the previous section, I defended the claim that while our beliefs ought to weaken in the face of accepted global sceptical claims, it looks as if they would not do so. In §III, I argued that beliefs that behave in such a way are *idées fixes*, and are to be explained non-epistemically. This is because, in general, if *S* appreciates a sceptical thesis targeting some set of his beliefs, and yet those beliefs do not weaken in the face of that appreciation, then one can conclude that *S*'s targeted set of beliefs are to be non-epistemically explained. At this point, if we accept that our beliefs about the external world and the unobserved would not weaken in the face of Cartesian, Humean and Goodmanian sceptical theses against them, then such beliefs look like prime candidates for being *idées fixes*, and thus prime candidates for non-epistemic explanation. One can see that we are very close to an inference from wide-scoped scepticism to naturalism.

We are not quite there, however. According to the argument I defended in §III, we can only conclude that *S*'s belief that *p* is an *idée fixe* if *S* appreciates (in the technical sense of §III) a sceptical thesis which targets his belief. But the notion of appreciating a sceptical thesis like Hume's or Descartes' is very

<sup>12</sup> *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham *et al.*, Vol. II (Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> B. Williams, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Inquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), ch. 2.

odd indeed. Can we really accept that all of our perceptual beliefs, or beliefs about the unobserved, are unjustified? This worry will rear its head again, but we might try to sidestep it for the time being by accepting the following counterfactual claim:

SC. Even if we were to appreciate Humean (or Cartesian or Goodmanian) wider-scoped sceptical theses, our beliefs would not diminish.

If we accept (SC), it need not be true that we, or anyone else, accept scepticism, nor need we think that anyone else ever has accepted scepticism. The consideration supporting this counterfactual would be as follows: 'Even if we were to be convinced by Cartesian, Humean or Goodmanian sceptical theses, this acceptance would not affect the beliefs that these sceptical theses target. It is difficult to imagine these global theses leading to the weakening of the beliefs that they target. As a group, these beliefs look immovable. They will not be budged by any single sceptical claim.' In so far as we think that (SC) is right, we have reason to believe that our beliefs about the world are *idées fixes*. For, as I argued above, we have reason to seek a non-epistemic explanation of any unmovable beliefs.

From what has been said so far, the following is a plausible inference from scepticism to the non-epistemic explanation of our beliefs. I use Humean scepticism about the unobserved, but any wider-scoped sceptical thesis can be used.

- (i) We all believe a number of things about what we are not presently observing
- (ii) Humean scepticism claims that there is no justifying evidence for propositions of that sort (all such inferences are circular); it tells us that belief in unobserved facts is no more justified than belief that those facts will not hold
- (iii) If we were to appreciate Hume's sceptical thesis, the beliefs it targets would not be affected by that appreciation: our beliefs in unobserved facts would not be diminished by our appreciation of a sceptical thesis targeting them
- (iv) It follows that our beliefs in the unobserved are *idées fixes* [from (i), (ii), and (iii) by the definition of '*idée fixe*']
- (v) A belief that is not dependent upon my assessment of its justificatory status must be non-epistemically determined, and so the right explanation of our beliefs in unobserved facts is non-epistemic [by the '*idée fixe* inference', from (iv)].

There are two differences between this argument and the narrow version outlined in §III. First, of course, is the difference in scope between the



respective sceptical theses appealed to in each argument. Nevertheless, if it is true, as I claimed in §IV, that the difference between local sceptical challenges and global ones is only a matter of degree, then there is no apparent reason to think that this argument is any less rational than a more local inference of the same form. The second difference between this argument and the argument in §III is that rather than utilizing the fact ‘*S* appreciates the sceptical thesis targeting his belief, and yet his belief is not affected’, this version of the argument appeals instead to a counterfactual claim ‘Were the believer to appreciate this sceptical thesis, his belief would not be affected’. I have suggested that this counterfactual, (SC), seems, at least initially, to be correct.

However, one might doubt that (SC) would hold up against more stringent scrutiny. One worry is that it might be thought that the state of affairs described in (SC)’s antecedent is impossible, that it is not possible for someone to be convinced by a global sceptical thesis. Given the difficulty in assessing the truth of a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent, we should perhaps be less than happy about accepting (SC).

Well, is it possible to accept a global sceptical thesis about one’s own beliefs? Is it possible to be convinced that all of one’s beliefs about, say, the external world are no more justified than some alternative set of beliefs? Stroud, a staunch defender of Cartesian scepticism, writes (‘Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge’, p. 545):

I would grant – indeed insist – that philosophical scepticism is not something we should seriously consider adopting or accepting (whatever that means).

Stroud’s writings have been the most important to epistemological scepticism in the past twenty years. Yet if Stroud himself deserves the title of ‘sceptic’, it is only because he thinks we should take sceptical theses seriously. He does not defend the *rightness* of scepticism. He never claims that our beliefs about the external world are no more justified than the alternative possibility that we are dreaming that these facts are true. His ‘defence’ of scepticism amounts to a defence of the fact that we do not yet have an answer to scepticism. All Stroud claims is that *if* his Cartesian requirement for doxastic justification is correct, then we have no more reason to hold some belief that *p* than to believe that we are dreaming that *p* is true. This stance is made most explicit in Stroud’s writings when he treats sceptical theses as a paradox, as a set of claims that cannot be right: ‘The Eleatic doctrine that nothing moves, for example, need not be in any remote sense a live intellectual option for us in order for us to be rightly challenged, overwhelmed, perhaps even stumped, by Zeno’s argument that Achilles can never overtake the Tortoise’. Scepticism, he continues, ‘is an “obstacle”

because it seems to make our knowledge impossible, just as the facts cited by Zeno seem to make overtaking impossible'.<sup>14</sup>

Stroud is right in refusing to accept scepticism, and in treating scepticism as a paradox to be solved and learned from, but I am not convinced that global sceptical theses are unacceptable. One reason to think that accepting a wide sceptical thesis is possible is that it is clearly possible to be convinced by a *narrow* sceptical thesis. The difference, as I have said, is only a matter of degree. Why should a sceptical thesis which questions a few beliefs be acceptable, but not one which questions all beliefs of some type? The case for the acceptability of global sceptical theses is made even stronger by the fact that van Fraassen's global sceptical thesis targeting beliefs about unobservables is acceptable. If van Fraassen's scepticism is acceptable (in, as ever, the technical sense of 'accepting scepticism' defined in §III), then why should Humean scepticism not be? Lacking a clear criterion of demarcation between van Fraassen's thesis and other wider-scoped theses, we are left without any reason to think that Humean scepticism is unacceptable.

This first reason for rejecting (SC) fails, but that does not mean that we should accept (SC). (SC) is unacceptable, not because its antecedent is impossible, but because it is outright false. We have reason to think that (i) if the antecedent of (SC) were true, and (ii) if we were to accept a global sceptical thesis, then our beliefs in the external world *would* diminish. Once again I appeal to the potential effect that van Fraassen's wide-scoped sceptical thesis could have on our beliefs. If accepting his sceptical thesis potentially diminishes our beliefs in unobservable entities, then why should our beliefs in unobserved, or even observed, entities not be similarly susceptible? I think this possibility considerably weakens (SC). (SC) says that even if we were to become convinced of a wide-scoped sceptical thesis like Cartesian scepticism, our beliefs in the external world would not budge. Those beliefs would not be affected by our thinking that they are no more justified than some alternative. This makes them very different, according to (SC), from other beliefs, a difference that is captured in the claim that they are to be non-epistemically explained. The property of being non-epistemically determined leads them to be resistant to counter-evidence. However, all this is premised on the claim that the beliefs that Cartesian scepticism targets will not be moved by counter-evidence, and this claim looks unfounded. If, as I have claimed, the difference between narrow and wide-scoped sceptical theses is merely a matter of degree, then there is every reason to think that they *would* weaken were we to become convinced of Cartesian scepticism. So (SC) is on weak ground.

<sup>14</sup> See Stroud, 'Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy*, 81 (1984), pp. 545–51.

A final consideration provides, I think, an even stronger objection to the argument from global scepticism to Humean naturalism, for it shows that even if (SC) were right, the inference from global scepticism to global naturalism would still not go through. If we had reason to accept (SC), then we would know that the *entirety* of our beliefs in the external world and unobserved facts would not weaken in the face of accepted global scepticism. However, in order to conclude from this that Humean naturalism is true, we would still need to decide whether this is due (a) to some property of the beliefs it targets, or (b) to a property of the sceptical thesis itself. It must be the former, if we are to conclude that these beliefs are non-epistemically determined. Unfortunately, there is reason to think that the lack of effect that global scepticisms have on our beliefs (or, rather, *would have* if we were to accept them) is not a property of the targeted beliefs themselves. For even if a global sceptical thesis would not affect someone's believing a given proposition, it is very likely that there exists a *narrow* sceptical argument which would. As we saw in §II, typical beliefs do weaken in the face of *particular* accepted criticism. While it may be true that Cartesian scepticism cannot affect my belief that I am sitting in front of a computer, it is likely that if a friend were to convince me that he had slipped a hallucinogen into my morning coffee, my belief that I am sitting in front of a computer might indeed be weakened. Again, while it is true that Humean scepticism cannot affect my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, if the astronomical community were to reach agreement that the sun is about to go supernova, then that very belief would no doubt be affected. Narrow sceptical challenges can clearly affect the *very same beliefs* as wide sceptical theses target. The very same beliefs which (if (SC) were right) would not weaken in the face of wide-scoped sceptical theses *would* weaken in the face of narrow-scoped theses. This suggests that there is nothing special about the beliefs themselves. So even if the counterfactual (SC) were sustainable, then a version of Humean naturalism that says that the beliefs targeted by wide-scoped sceptical theses are to be non-epistemically explained would still not be justified.

The lack of effect which, say, Cartesian and Humean global sceptical theses in fact have on our beliefs is undoubtedly due to the fact that none of us does in fact accept the conclusions of Cartesian and Humean sceptical theses. None of us thinks that our beliefs in the external world, or in unobserved facts, really are unjustified, and so we do not expect such theses to affect our beliefs negatively, as they would were we to accept them. The point of the previous paragraph, however, is that even if we were to discover somehow that accepted global sceptical arguments do not affect the beliefs they target, all we could conclude from that discovery would be that some

feature of global sceptical theses prevents them from affecting our beliefs as narrow ones do. In such a situation, the disparity between the effect that accepted narrow-scoped theses have on our beliefs and the *lack* of effect that accepted wide-scoped sceptical claims have on our beliefs (which I am imagining for the moment) would indicate to us that the latter is due not to some feature of the targeted beliefs themselves, but rather to some difference between the effects that general and particular criticisms have on the beliefs they target. Global epistemic challenges, we might conclude, simply do not have the power that particular challenges have.

In any case, a lack of effect that accepted global sceptical theses have on the beliefs they target does not allow us to make any conclusions about the determination of those beliefs. Hence my attempt to substantiate an argument from global scepticism to Humean naturalism fails, and it remains to be seen whether Hume, or anyone else, can uphold an inference from some global sceptical thesis to substantial claims about the source or determination of the beliefs that such theses target.<sup>15</sup>

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