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WHAT THE WISE OUGHT BELIEVE: A VOLUNTARIST INTERPRETATION OF HUME’S GENERAL RULES

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This paper advances an interpretation of what Hume called ‘the general rules’: natural principles of belief-formation that nevertheless can be augmented via reflection.

According to Hume, reflection is, in part, what separates the wise from the vulgar. In this paper I argue that for Hume being wise must therefore be, to some degree, voluntary.

Hume faced a significant problem in attempting to reconcile his epistemic normativity, i.e. his claims about what we *ought* to believe, with his largely involuntarist theory of the mind. Reflection on the General Rules, and an interpretation of that reflection as voluntary, helps explain not only Hume’s theory of belief, but also how he hoped to reconcile epistemic normativity with naturalism about the mental.

KEYWORDS: Hume; General Rules; belief; doxastic involuntarism; epistemic normativity

‘A general rule is only a propensity; at the same time it is the great scourge of propensities.’

–John Passmore

1. INTRODUCTION

The task of this paper is an interpretation and statement of a deep problem in Hume’s theory of belief. So I’ll begin with a summary of what I take to be that theory’s central doctrines. In this paper I am principally concerned with Hume’s *doxastic involuntarism*, i.e. his suggestion that belief *cannot be willed*. That claim creates particular difficulties for Hume’s *evidentialism*: the doctrine that we ought to believe only in proportion to reliable inductive evidence, rather than on the basis of superstitions or prejudice. I will call the problem of reconciling Hume’s epistemic normativity with his doxastic involuntarism ‘The Problem of Believing Wisely’ (because according to Hume we ought to believe as ‘the wise’ do.) Ultimately, whether a Humean can resolve this problem depends upon the viability of what Hume called ‘the general rules.’

Hume's theory of belief can be summarized in about a half-dozen claims: (i) belief is a manner of conception, characterized by (ii) forceful and vivacious feeling. It is (iii) analogous to the feeling of *impressions*, but also the memories, and is (iv) capable of being transferred to other ‘weaker’ ideas via association. It (v) arises in us naturally, as (vi) an observation of causation produced by custom. It is belief in (vii) an existence. While it is (vi) that has been most forcefully inscribed on our own memories and imaginations, not to mention the extant literature on Hume, in this paper my concern will be with (v), and how Hume can make good on his naturalism. I argue below that Hume can only make good on (v) by treating it as a process

capable of being influenced by reflection, when that reflection is construed as *voluntary*. This is a bit surprising, given Hume's frequent emphasis of the *involuntary* nature of belief, but that will be my thesis.

In the first section I begin with a presentation of the *prima facie* evidence for reading Hume as a *doxastic involuntarist*, and with it a pair of distinctions necessary for understanding what that doctrine amounts to. In the section following I present what I call 'The Problem of Believing Wisely,' a problem that any thoroughgoing involuntarist (Humean or otherwise) must face. That problem is, roughly, making one's epistemic normativity consistent with one's naturalism. In conclusion I advance a novel interpretation of Hume's so-called 'general rules,' and couch it as Hume's best chance at resolving the Problem of Believing Wisely. I will argue that the General Rules were treated by Hume as natural principles of belief formation that nevertheless can be refined and corrected by thoughtful consideration. Successful or not, Hume hoped to explain our beliefs naturalistically, but also hold us accountable for them. It is an important philosophical task, if not one easily accomplished.

2. WAS HUME A DOXASTIC INVOLUNTARIST?

He was. Or at least he meant to be. The degree to which he was unable to be is what I hope to demonstrate in this paper. My immediate task in this regard is simply defining doxastic involuntarism and presenting some evidence that Hume committed himself to the doctrine. Before beginning that task, however, it is important to point out that 'involuntarist' was not a label Hume self-applied, and it is likely (in my estimation) that he would have rejected such a branding. The main reason for suspecting so is Hume's famous *compatibilism* with respect to

questions concerning the freedom of the will. One of the first philosophers to articulate compatibilism forcefully, Hume may be most responsible for the popularity of that approach today. It seems likely, were we to confront Hume with the charge that he treated beliefs as incapable of being voluntarily held, he would seek to similarly explode our voluntarist/involuntarist dichotomy.¹ Nevertheless, I argue here (in this section and the next) that the view of him as an involuntarist is appropriately, if problematically, ascribed.

Let us begin by defining *modal doxastic involuntarism* as the view that beliefs *cannot* be acquired as a result of determination by the will. In somewhat more Humean language we might say the modal doxastic voluntarist believes humans have a ‘power,’ i.e. the ability to believe (or not believe) on the basis of willing. The modal doxastic *involuntarist*, on the other hand, is someone who would deny humans have such a power. According to (global) modal doxastic involuntarism, what is willed is entirely irrelevant for what is believed. Believing is treated as a separate cognitive activity. Whatever natural mechanisms produce beliefs, mechanisms surely shared with other animals and discoverable through scientific investigation, the involuntarist understands them to be operating independently of our willing.

¹ Hume’s discussions of liberty and necessity consider whether an ‘object’ or ‘event’ can be construed as ‘necessitated’ by constant conjunctions witnessed in nature, including human nature, or whether that object or event is the result of ‘liberty,’ insofar as it is the product of the will. Famously, Hume argued both. But Hume was in those places addressing a more general question than the one presently concerning us regarding the origination of belief. Can believing, also, be subsumed under Humean compatibilism? Is believing an act? Can it, also, be construed as an ‘object’ or ‘event’ subject to determination by the will? Here it is important to avoid being overhasty in attributing Hume a position. It would be perfectly possible for a philosopher to be compatibilist with respect to first-order acts, yet remain unconvinced that beliefs are appropriately construed as acts, and hence think belief inapt for similar analysis. The mere fact that Hume was a first-order compatibilist does not, by itself, establish that he was a doxastic compatibilist.

Before we proceed further, I should make a pair of comments about the proposed definition. First, it is stronger than the mere claim that beliefs are *in fact* not held as the result of willing. The claim that I am associating with the label ‘modal doxastic involuntarism,’ for purposes of this paper, is that it is *psychologically impossible* to believe willfully. Second, doxastic involuntarism is normally taken to be a *global* thesis, i.e. a thesis about *all* beliefs. This should be distinguished from more specific claims about the involuntary origination of a particular belief or set of beliefs. *Global doxastic involuntarism* is the thesis that there are *no* beliefs that can be (or are) acquired as the result of willing. *Local doxastic involuntarism* would merely be the thesis that for some particular belief ϕ , or some set of beliefs type Φ , the particular belief or set of beliefs cannot be (or are not) held as the result of willing.

The two distinctions are important because of the plausibility of the view that *some* of our beliefs are *more or less* within voluntary control than others, or than they may have been otherwise. We may eventually discover that it is more within my voluntary control to believe what I will about an abstruse subject for which I rely on dubious human testimony, for example. It might be less within my control to believe what I will about a subject of immediate sensory awareness, for example. The distinction between *global doxastic involuntarism* and *local doxastic involuntarism* makes it possible to suggest that some beliefs or sets of beliefs cannot be or aren’t the product of willing while others can be or are. The distinction between modally robust and contingent *doxastic involuntarism* makes it possible to suggest that some or all of my beliefs are involuntarily held, but needn’t have been.

The two distinctions are important for my interpretive conclusion below. But only one is strictly necessary for attributing a baseline view about doxastic involuntarism to Hume. There is

a good deal of textual evidence for interpreting Hume as a *modal doxastic involuntarist*, whether local or global. The evidence can be found in passages like the following:

Secondly, The mind has the command over all its ideas, and can separate, unite, mix, and vary them, as it pleases; so that if belief consisted merely in a new idea, annex'd to the conception, it wou'd be in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd. We may, therefore, conclude, that belief consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment; in something, that depends not on the will, but must arise from certain determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters.

(T Appendix 2; SBN 623)²

When Hume wrote: 'if belief consisted merely in a new idea, annex'd to the conception, it wou'd be in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd,' I take him to be expressing (quite generally, at least about *some* type of belief) that we *cannot* simply believe what we please. Note particularly his phrase: 'depends not on the will, but must arise from certain determinate causes and principle, of which we are not masters.' And that is not the only bit of textual

² The source here is David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-40]. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Hereafter abbreviated 'T' and cited by book, part, section, and paragraph numbers. I also include the page number from the traditional Selby-Bigge edition, revised by Nidditch, abbreviated 'SBN.' A nearly identical version of this argument is T Abstract *Abs.* 20; SBN 653. Cf. T 1.1.4.4; SBN 12.

evidence. Similar passages can be found throughout Hume's work.³ Another particularly pointed statement is the following:

Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sun-shine.

(T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183)

In this passage Hume is clearly drawing out his famed analogy between the *force and vivacity* of belief and the *force and vivacity* of present *impressions*. But in passages like this one the involuntarist overtones, even in Hume's choice of terminology 'force' and 'impression,' are also evident. What is important for my argument below is simply to draw your attention to Hume's claim that we *cannot* forbear believing when we find ourselves in the circumstances natural for belief.⁴ This is just what I mean when I call him a *modal doxastic involuntarist*. According to

³ See T 1.3.7.3, 1.3.7.7, 1.3.9.2-1.3.9.3, 1.3.9.17, 1.3.10.4, 1.3.10.8, 1.3.12.23, 1.3.13.8, 1.4.1.8, 1.4.2.12, 1.4.2.51, 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.9-1.4.7.10, 2.3.1.13-2.3.1.14, App. 2, Abstract *Abs.* 20-21 (SBN 95, 628-29, 107-08, 116, 120, 122-23, 140-01, 147, 183-84, 192, 214, 218, 269-70, 404, 623-24, 653-54, respectively.)

⁴ Since the classic work by Kemp Smith it is often claimed that Hume treated at least two beliefs as having special epistemic status. Following Kemp Smith, these are now commonly referred to as the *natural beliefs* (see Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 455). However, I myself cannot find this doctrine in Hume, despite a relatively diligent search, so I do *not* follow Kemp Smith in identifying 'natural belief' as a unique kind of belief, several in number and with privileged epistemic status. As I use the phrase, all Humean beliefs are 'natural beliefs.'

Hume when faced with believable circumstances we confront an ‘absolute and uncontrollable necessity,’ of the same sort that compels us to breathe, or that compels us to feel warmth when standing next to a fire. Our compulsion to believe in such circumstances is, according to Hume, quite natural and irresistible.

3. THE PROBLEM OF BELIEVING WISELY

It has already been said, by scholars considerably more erudite than myself, that Hume was not entirely consistent in his claims that belief cannot be willed. The identification of an ‘inconsistency’ in this regard dates back to at least to H.H. Price and the Gifford lectures of 1960.

...it is worth while to point out that though Hume does say that belief is wholly involuntary---'depends not on the will', arises from principles 'of which we are not masters'---yet he is not wholly consistent about it.

First, what we may call his own philosophical practice seems to contradict his anti-Cartesian theory. If anyone ever went in for Cartesian doubt on the grand scale, surely Hume did... In that mood, he certainly does refrain from assenting to the propositions which he says elsewhere that we cannot help believing...

Secondly, in his less skeptical moods Hume is willing to divide our beliefs about matters of fact into two classes. On the one hand, there are the beliefs which have strong inductive support, based on a long experience of constant conjunctions; on the other, there are beliefs which have very little inductive support or none at all.

my calling a belief ‘natural’ simply emphasizes Hume’s naturalistic account of its origination, e.g. in *custom*.

Readers should beware my break with common usage in this regard.

... Nevertheless (in this less skeptical mood) Hume clearly does think that there is a distinction between sensible or sober or sane beliefs on the one side, and silly or superstitious beliefs on the other.

Not only that: he clearly thinks that it is better to hold sensible beliefs, those which have strong inductive support from past experience (of constant conjunctions), than to hold superstitious or silly ones which have very weak inductive support or none at all.

(Price, *Belief*, 239-40)

According to Price, Hume was not only committed to doxastic involuntarism, but also to treating beliefs as capable of being *willingly suspended*. Price thought this the case because he thought suspension of belief was a prerequisite for Hume's skepticism. The function of the skeptical arguments was not just depriving beliefs of warrant. On Price's reading, skepticism involved 'refrain[ing] from assenting' to what would otherwise naturally be believed. In addition to this Hume was committed, according to Price, to differentiating beliefs with 'strong inductive support' from those with 'weak inductive support.'⁵ And Price read Hume not only as describing such a difference, but as *counseling* us to believe as the wise person would, i.e. suggesting we *ought* to believe what has stronger inductive support and *ought not* believe what has weaker inductive support. According to Price, such recommendations presuppose *the ability to voluntarily believe or not*, insofar as counseling presupposes that persons counseled have the

⁵ Whether or not we consider this 'support' to be full blown justification (as Price did), or merely a feature of the psychological mechanism, it clearly falls under Hume's rubric of *custom*.

power to believe or not, according to the determinations of their wills. So the core of the inconsistency Price identified in Hume was Hume's supposed commitment, despite his involuntarist remarks, to *withholding assent*.

Price has not been the only reader to find such a problem in Hume.⁶ We are in very much the same territory when reading Passmore:

A thorough-going mechanical theory will have to argue, rather than what we call 'giving the preference to one argument over another' *simply consists* in a more vivid idea somehow driving out a less vivid idea. If Hume does not say this, I think, because he has momentarily fallen into the language of the vulgar; he has a picture in the back of his mind, a picture which he cannot entirely expunge, of a human being's hesitating between two alternative views, uncertain which to accept, and finally deciding between them.

(Passmore, *Bicentenary Papers*, 83)⁷

Price and Passmore (and others) have hit upon a general problem facing doxastic involuntarists, like Hume, who would also appeal to normative epistemic distinctions, or otherwise deploy normative language in advising us how we *ought* to believe. Our contemporary literature in

⁶ Though I frame it somewhat uniquely, discussion of what I call the 'Problem of Believing Wisely,' may also be found in Miriam McCormick ('Why Should We Be Wise?', 3-19), David Owen (*Hume's Reason*, 213-23), Lorne Falkenstein ('Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism,' 59-62), John Passmore (*Hume's Intentions*, 160-176), Antony Flew (*Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 96-99), John Laird (*Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*, 108), C.D. Broad ('Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles,' 91-94), and perhaps many others besides.

⁷ A revised version is Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 165. My discussion here is directly indebted to Passmore.

epistemology treats this problem under the topic ‘epistemic deontology.’ But as a simple example of what I mean, in the context of Hume’s philosophy, we may follow some of the recent work on Hume and consider his appeal to ‘wisdom.’⁸ Wisdom was supposed by Hume to be good. So ‘wisdom’ not only has an epistemic valence, but also a normative one. Because wisdom is good (i.e. for Hume, ‘useful’ to oneself and others) it makes sense for him to *counsel* us to be wise, or to tell us we *ought not* be superstitious, or *ought* to prefer one claim over another (insofar as believing it would make us wiser). What I will call the ‘Problem of Believing Wisely’ is the problem of reconciling this epistemic normativity with Hume’s naturalist theory of belief.

Especially in places where Hume champions philosophy and criticizes superstition, but at many key moments, he indeed counsels us to be wise. The *Treatise* and *Enquiries* are replete with normative epistemic language.⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these is the passage at the finale of the first *Enquiry*, long celebrated (if not self-consciously) by positivists, wherein Hume admonishes us to commit ‘to the flames’ works that concern neither abstract reasoning about quantities nor experimental reasoning about facts, works that ought not be believed. Another celebrated passage from the first *Enquiry* comes in the context of Hume’s famous discussion of miracles:

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

⁸ Here I have in mind particularly McCormick. ‘Why Should We Be Wise?’, 3-19. See her survey of the ‘Problem of Control,’ 6-9.

⁹ The beginnings of a good list are provided by Falkenstein. ‘Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism,’ 62-63.

assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event.

(EHU 10.4; SBN 110)¹⁰

Hume here suggests the *evidentialist principle* that we *ought* to believe only to the degree that we have evidence, i.e. *ought not* to believe to the degree that we don't. As usual, Hume's general counsel was incredulity, i.e. *we ought not to believe* testimony on behalf of miracles, insofar as the miraculous is defined in opposition to heretofore exception-less regularity. How could that conclusion be formulated, if not as a normative epistemic claim?¹¹

This passage about the wise person 'proportion[ing] belief to the evidence' would not be a puzzle if it had instead been written by someone who holds what Stroud (rather prosaically) calls 'the traditional conception of the nature of man' (Stroud, *Hume*, 11). On the 'traditional conception' a distinctive feature of human wisdom is our sensitivity to evidence, not insofar as we naturally believe, but insofar as we consciously assess evidence *qua evidence* and come to decisions via deliberation, i.e. provisionally withhold assent until all relevant data has been collected, evaluated, and then *reflectively endorsed* (or dissented from, or judged insufficient, etc.) To judge, in this traditional sense, presumes the ability to voluntarily control one's belief-forming mechanisms, at least to the degree required to postpone belief for purposes of non-

¹⁰ The source here is David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748]. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Here and following abbreviated 'EHU'; citation is to section and paragraph numbers. I also include page numbers from the traditional Selby-Bigge edition, revised by Nidditch, abbreviated 'SBN.'

¹¹ For a good reconstruction of the miracles argument, albeit one that still does not detangle the normative language from the descriptive, see Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 137-162.

prejudicial assessment in a period of *deliberation*. The history of the deep conceptual connection between the deliberative and the voluntary is reflected in etymologies of verbs like ‘to deliberate’ and adjectives like ‘deliberate.’ And the ability to form a wise judgement was supposed by many to require not only good instincts, but rational control over one’s self; the period of *deliberation* was supposed to end (in cases where it did not degenerate into dithering) in self-conscious *decision*.¹² This process was traditionally construed as ‘rising above’ the merely animal instincts, including, and perhaps especially, the epistemic ones. Judging wisely meant coming to a ‘cool-headed’ decision guided by reason, itself traditionally construed as distinguishing *homo sapiens* from our merely sentient brethren. Those who lacked the rational capacity or proclivity, i.e. who were not *deliberate* in their judgements, were classically admonished as impetuous, rash, or even ‘animalistic.’

But it should go without saying that this was not Hume’s view. One of the advertised features of Hume’s newer theory of belief was its *naturalistic* account of belief formation, not only applicable to the ‘subtlety and refinements’ of the wise, but to the beliefs of ‘mere animals,’ ‘children,’ and ‘the common people.’ Hume’s theory was set against the traditional account precisely insofar as it broke the traditional linkage between the believed and the voluntary.¹³ Seeking to provide explanation of the beliefs of non-human animals and *all* members of our species, regardless of our capacity or proclivity for rational deliberation, Hume criticized the older theories as *insufficiently general*, suggesting they had mistakenly focused on the activity of only a select few, i.e. ‘the wise,’ and were not truthfully characteristic of the way we *all* believe.

¹² A measure of the ‘traditional’ nature of this theory, including the close conceptual connection between the deliberative and the voluntary, is Aristotle’s in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 30-40.

¹³ In this point I am merely following Stroud (see *Hume*, 76-77), and David Fate Norton (*Hume: Common-Sense Moralist*, 20).

The common defect of those systems, which philosophers have employ'd to account of the actions of the mind, is, that they suppose such a subtilty and refinement of thought, as not only exceed the capacity of mere animals, but even of children and the common people in our own species; who are notwithstanding susceptible of the same emotions and affections as persons of the most accomplish'd genius and understanding. Such a subtilty is a clear proof of the falshood, as the contrary simplicity of the truth, of any system.

(T 1.3.16.3; SBN 176)

In Hume's supposedly less 'subtile' theory there would be no such thing as traditional *deliberation*. Hume's naturalistic account was meant to be distinctive because it would not include the voluntarism entangled in the traditional theories of judgement.

Nevertheless, Hume's less traditional theory may have added as many complications as it cleared. If, as Hume thought, credulity is what happens to us when we 'relax our thought,' if beliefs are as he calls them, 'indolent beliefs,' then there arises a new, second-order question about whether we may voluntarily attend to philosophical arguments or practical affairs, and hence retain some measure of control over whether we come to believe or disbelieve on at least the *indirect* basis of controlling our own attention. Can we not, through a process of foresight and will, at least situate ourselves in relation to the world around us such that we will (otherwise naturally) come to believe such-and-so?¹⁴

For example, try as I might to believe there is a tiger in the room with me, if I have no present perceptual evidence for that belief, it is doomed. I just don't *feel* it stalking me while my

¹⁴ Not everyone thought this an important question. Cf. Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 126.

back is turned. And that's what is (or is effectively equivalent to) believing, according to Hume. Contrariwise, were there a tiger in the room, as you read these words (never mind in that circumstance why you would still be reading), then try as you might you would not be able to sustain your belief that it did not exist. In that circumstance your belief would be *impressed* upon you immediately and 'naturally,' i.e. entirely outside the influence of your rational faculties, traditionally construed as volitional. Hume's involuntarism here seems particularly good, i.e. when applied to cases of belief based on immediate sensory awareness. Nevertheless, you have at least *some* measure of control over your belief that there is a tiger present. If not by being able to *directly* will it, then at least insofar as you are able to voluntarily take yourself downtown to a zoological garden and enter the exhibit marked 'Great Cats of the Amur Region.'

So here is a new question. Hume may have been a staunch doxastic involuntarist, but did he leave room for at least this kind of, let's now call it *second-order doxastic voluntarism*?¹⁵ In which case, each of us would be able to voluntarily decide for ourselves whether we would believe that the objects of the external world exist, or are causally ordered, etc., albeit *indirectly*, i.e. by determining whether we will carefully attend to the skeptical arguments, or instead play a lively game of backgammon and make merry with our friends (see T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269).

A philosopher who insists on reading Hume's naturalism as thoroughgoing mechanism may object to such a suggestion. He or she may say that the supposedly voluntary 'selection' of when and where we attend to philosophical reasoning, as opposed to believing instinctually, is itself determined by nature. It is determined by our so-called 'hard-wiring.' Or it is determined

¹⁵ Many suggest that he did leave room for it. See, for examples: McCormick, 'Why Should We be Wise?', 7; Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 213-16; Falkenstein, 'Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism,' 33; Norton, *David Hume: Commonsense Moralism*, 236-38; Penelhum, *McGill Hume Studies*, 268.

by the particular experiences in a particular past of a particular individual, i.e. those constant conjunctions she witnessed and habits of mind she picked up as a result. In much the way that Hume argues that our actions are predictable and customary, the thoroughgoing mechanist might argue that our habits of thought are too, including the attention we pay to philosophy or science or skeptical argument. Like trips to the zoo, habits of mind might similarly be described, perhaps with even greater explanatory power, as *involuntary*.

Here, again, we should tread carefully. For the remainder of this discussion I will call an interpretation that does not go so far as to deny Hume's second-order doxastic voluntarism, but nevertheless insists on a mechanistic account, even of those actions that produce beliefs indirectly, *thoroughgoing mechanism*. This position should not be confused with someone who reads Hume as a *thoroughgoing involuntarist*, i.e. someone who interprets him as denying not merely that beliefs can be directly willed by us, but also as denying there can be *any* voluntary control in the regulation of beliefs at the second-order, e.g. even insofar as one could indirectly control one's belief that there is a tiger by traveling to see one at a zoo. *Thoroughgoing involuntarists* deny both the first-order and second-order doxastic voluntarism; *thoroughgoing mechanists* need not, they need only provide a mechanistic account of each.

I will not attempt to settle the question between those two interpretations of Hume. Instead I would like to see where we are left with the 'Problem of Believing Wisely.' The most serious version of that problem arises when we combine Hume's epistemic counsel with *thoroughgoing involuntarism*, i.e. when we interpret him without the liberty of at least second-order doxastic voluntarism. If it is not possible for us to believe or not, willingly, because we are not even free to act in such a way that some particular belief would otherwise naturally result in us, or not, then someone telling us that we 'ought' to believe such and so, on grounds that it

would be wise or prudent or useful, *or on any grounds whatsoever*, is at best a kind of clever causal manipulation. In that case we would simply believe or not, per our fully mechanized custom. Hume's normative claims about belief, if not strictly inconsistent with thoroughgoing doxastic involuntarism, cannot in that case be construed as appeals to reason. They would not be 'counsels,' because any distinction between practical reasoning and psychological manipulation would be collapsed. In that case reason would not merely be slave to the passions, it would be no more.¹⁶

However, even reading Hume as a thoroughgoing mechanist we would still face a significant challenge. To see that this is so, imagine that we were to take an even more radical step and treat his project as the mere description of human nature, completely ignoring all its epistemic normativity. The Problem of Believing Wisely would not thereby be dissolved. Even in that case there would remain the problem of explaining how, were belief nothing but the automatic result of witnessing more or less constant conjunctions, there could be such a thing as 'wise' beliefs as opposed to 'unwise' ones. There would have to be in that case at least some difference in the mechanisms producing those two different types of belief. We might presume for the sake of argument something totally ludicrous, that Hume could have used the term 'wise' purely descriptively, without even the slightest whiff of benediction. Or we might presume for the sake of argument something much more plausible, that Hume *intended* to use that term descriptively rather than normatively. (I think this might actually have been the case.) But in either case, what would distinguish the mechanism producing the 'wise' beliefs, from the mechanism producing the 'unwise' ones?

¹⁶ Here is an opportunity to point out another bit of famous Humean normative language, not merely that reason *is* slave, but that it 'ought only to be' (T 2.3.3.4; SBN 414).

What I have called the ‘Problem of Believing Wisely’ is sometimes framed as a problem of warrant, i.e. a problem of explaining how Hume could have thought that some of our beliefs are *justified*. But what I have shown here is that the Problem of Believing Wisely is quite independent of any consideration of warrant.¹⁷ It raises not only the specter of inconsistency for those who would read Hume as a thoroughgoing involuntarist, it also challenges any thoroughly mechanistic interpretation of his theory of belief, even one that would (implausibly) treat his project as purely descriptive in nature. For if belief is nothing more than a state (for Hume it is a sentiment, but let us generalize for a moment) produced in us automatically by the operations of our psychology, when jogged into effect by the combined input of our immediate perceptual environment and our cognitive history or endowment, then what mechanism is it that accounts for the difference between those who believe ‘wisely’ and those who do not? Even leaving all normativity out of consideration, the mere distinction of the ‘wise’ from the ‘unwise’ presents a challenge for serious interpretation. That challenge can be construed as a purely explanatory one: accounting for the natural mechanism or mechanisms by which beliefs are formed ‘wisely’ or ‘unwisely.’

4. THE GENERAL RULES

Hume’s own answer to this challenge lies in his so-called ‘General Rules.’¹⁸ It may be the case that Hume hoped to account for the production of belief as a purely mechanical process.

¹⁷ In this respect I also follow Owen.

¹⁸ Some have denied Hume had an answer to this challenge. Cf. Pears, *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Idealism*, 114.

It was not, however, supposed by him to be a simple one. It is because ‘causal circumstances’ can be complex that it is no trivial business to track the regularities of nature. The foundation of Hume’s theory in this regard was, of course, *custom* (see T 1.3.13.9; SBN 147). It is because novel causes resemble previously witnessed causes that, through custom, we expect novel effects resembling previously witnessed, more or less constantly conjoined, effects. But Hume here faced a classic problem of causal discrimination. Which parts of the previously witnessed circumstances were essential for the cause and which parts essential for the effect? Which parts were only accidentally correlated? It is quite possible to identify a part or parts of previously witnessed circumstances that were merely ‘conjoin’d by accident,’ and then come by custom (by no other principle than custom itself!) to expect an effect in their presence, even absent an actual cause. *Mutatis mutandis*, we might not expect an effect in the presence of its cause merely because we have, by no other principle than custom itself, identified some superfluous parts of the previously witnessed circumstances.

Hume clearly believed, in cases where ideas conflict, that it is the more forceful and vivacious ideas that swamp the weaker ones. But Hume also clearly recognized the need to explain why the result of such conflicts can be ‘unwise’ beliefs rather than the most accurate and judicious depictions and predictions. If the only question in such cases were which type of experience a person had had *more* of, then Hume could simply have said the greater force and vivacity always takes the day. But Hume’s (mostly) mechanistic account of custom has it that customarily expected ideas can come into conflict with other customarily expected ideas. So Hume needed an account of a mechanism, *other than custom itself*, by which one customary connection could come to dominate its rivals and become believed. The problem of accounting

for that mechanism is only exacerbated when we add to it the demand of differentiating ‘wise’ from ‘unwise’ beliefs.

Whether the falsity of all unwise beliefs can be exhaustively explained by our inability to discriminate genuine causes, and whether that requires some additional influence of the passions or failing in the imagination, is beyond my present argument. Hume has a rich and sophisticated theory in this regard, and I have only scratched its surface. The only point necessary for motivating Hume’s invocation of the General Rules is that conflicts between customarily reinforced ideas form an essential part of causal discrimination, and Hume thought both wise and unwise, yet fully natural, beliefs result. To advance an explanation of this phenomenon he invoked what he called ‘The General Rules.’

We shall afterwards take notice of some general rules, by which we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects; and these rules are form’d on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgments we form concerning objects. By them we learn to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes; and when we find that an effect can be produc’d without the concurrence of any particular circumstance, we conclude that that circumstance makes not a part of the efficacious cause, however frequently conjoin’d with it.

(T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149)

The General Rules were clearly meant to be *regulatory*. Following Lyons, we can understand them as ‘belief-like states with the content of statistical or universal generalizations’ (Lyons, ‘General Rules and the Justification of Probable Belief,’ 254). Despite the fact that their content can be ‘supply’d by the natural principles of our understanding’ (T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175) their full

employment is by no means guaranteed by nature. We should note, in particular, Hume's use of the word 'ought' in this very context. Even were we to treat that 'ought' as a lapse or aberration (or grant such a reading for the sake of argument), Hume clearly viewed the function of the General Rules as the *augmentation* of custom in circumstances of complex causal discrimination. He says here: 'By them we learn to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes.' So while the General Rules might themselves be expressions of basic principles of causation, it is not merely our *use* of them, but also our *learning by* them that is significant. That *learning* is what helps us discriminate the causes from the non-causes, and hence changes the outcome (for the better) in conflicts amongst our ideas, i.e. conflicts that would otherwise be settled solely by the passions or our more parochial custom.

So whether we ought to use the General Rules, or not, Hume clearly thought that the wise have *learned* by them. However, it would be a mistake to think that the entire difference between the wise and the vulgar is merely that the wise use the General Rules while the 'vulgar' (i.e. the unwise) make no use of them.

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 establish'd principles of reasoning; which is the cause of our rejecting it. This is a second influence of general rules, and implies the condemnation of the former. 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.

(T 1.3.13.12; SBN 149)

Ideas can conflict. And not all of them come to be believed. But as this passage also makes plain, beliefs formed as a result of General Rules, according to Hume, are also capable of conflict with other beliefs formed as a result of the ‘second influence’ of General Rules.

Following Hearn, Falkenstein, and a variety of others, I read Hume’s suggestion here, that the wise ‘take a review of this act of the mind, and compare it with the more general and authentic operations of the understanding,’ as an act of *voluntary reflection*.¹⁹ This has consequences, I will now argue, for our reading of Hume. It entails, for example, that Hearn and Falkenstein (and I) treat him as a second-order doxastic voluntarist.²⁰

Unlike Hearn and Falkenstein, I do not think that we need to understand such conflicts as shaping up between two distinct rules or sets of rules with opposing contents, i.e. ‘a “second” general rule... that condemns a number of “first” ones’ (Falkenstein, ‘Naturalism, Normativity,

¹⁹ See Hearn, ‘“General Rules” in Hume’s Treatise,’ 410. Cf. the footnote to EHU 9.5 (SBN 107), where Hume says the discrimination of causes requires ‘great attention.’ Cf. also T 1.3.10.12 (SBN 630-3). The interpretation of the ‘second influence’ as the result of *reflection* is not uncommon in the literature. Cf. Morris, *Blackwell Guide to Hume’s Treatise*, 85-89; and Serjeantson, *Impressions of Hume*, 195. Owen endorses it in *Hume’s Reason*, 149, 213ff. It is also argued for by Norton, *Hume: Common-Sense Moralism*, 208-221. And Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 205, and Traiger, *Persons and Passions*, 100-11. Whether all would agree with my interpretation of such reflection as *voluntary* is considerably less likely, or clear.

²⁰ Falkenstein is especially clear on this commitment. Cf. ‘Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism,’ 32-33.

and Scepticism,’ 48).²¹ Instead the difference that Hume had in mind between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ *influence* of the General Rules is precisely the voluntary act of reflection itself, i.e. reflection that may be upon the very same rule or set of rules otherwise only instinctually employed. On the reading that I am offering here it is because the first influence is *unreflective*, i.e. involuntary, that it is also insufficient. Nevertheless, the application of such rules comes naturally to every sentient creature, at least to some degree. (And of course in more or less degree to different creatures.) The ‘second influence,’ on the other hand, are those very same rules, but now insofar as they are *reflectively willed*, i.e. voluntarily endorsed and applied to one’s memories, or voluntarily endorsed and applied to a richly imagined range of alternative possible cases.

As I noted above, the reading of the ‘second influence,’ as associated with *reflection* is not uncommon. What I mean to contribute here is greater clarity about the way that voluntarism sneaks back into Hume’s account, via that reflection. Whatever Hume might have meant by ‘learning’ in this context, learning by a General Rule cannot be a matter of simple habituation. In that case ‘learning by the rule’ would be nothing more than its repeated application. Consider the important question of when we *ought* to make an inductive generalization. However natural that leap, however frequently we do it, after witnessing however many more or less constant conjunctions, the habit of mind itself is something that can be endorsed or rejected by us, depending upon its circumstances. To reflect on those circumstances means to think about generalizing, and our natural tendency to generalize, and either will it in those circumstances, or

²¹ Also see Hearn, “‘General Rules,’” 407-411. Capaldi may also commit himself to this reading. See Capaldi, *Hume: Newtonian Philosopher*, 126. However, Capaldi also suggests the reading I prefer (on the same page) when he writes: ‘the real issue is not whether people use general rules but whether they have been *careful* and diligent in the use of general rules.’

will ourselves otherwise. We might catch ourselves generalizing (as we naturally do) in unguarded moments, and search our memories to ask whether similar effects *really have* always followed similar causes. And it would be *wise* for us to scrutinize ourselves in that manner. We ought to do so. But there could be no *normative* question here, at least not of the particular sort that Hume invoked, without the willing. Learning when and how we ought to generalize (first by noticing the circumstances in which generalization comes naturally, but then by noticing that not all such circumstances are those in which we ought to generalize) cannot have been thought by Hume a matter of mere repetition. The task of bringing experience and the rules we naturally use for ordering that experience to full consciousness, i.e. understanding such rules as consistent with other ‘establish’d principles of reasoning,’ is particularly the purview of sagacity.²²

An advantage of this account is that it makes sense of Hume’s association of the ‘first influence’ of the General Rules with *prejudice*. Consider one example of *prejudice* identified by Hume in the *Treatise*: ‘An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity.’ Hume clearly claimed that this ‘fourth unphilosophical species of probability’ is ‘deriv’d from *general rules*’ (T 1.3.13.7; SBN 146). This has puzzled readers of Hume, who would have thought General Rules were supposed to be *good*, but that prejudices are obviously *bad*. Because prejudices are *unwise* generalizations those readers have been tempted to mistakenly posit an entirely different ‘second type’ of General Rules, distinct from those Hume endorsed as the rules ‘by which we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects’ (T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149). But on my account those are the very same rules. Prejudices are simply poor (i.e. hasty) causal generalizations, the result of instinctually employed, but not reflectively

²² Cf. Serjeantson, ‘Hume’s General Rules and the “Chief Business of Philosophers”,’ 206-07. The account that I advocate here is also close to the one articulated by Owen at the end of *Hume’s Reason*.

endorsable, and hence insufficiently learned, General Rules. Prejudices remain innocent, even when pernicious and inaccurate, until they are actively willed.

This reading of the General Rules should be contrasted with the account provided by Marie A. Martin. I follow Martin in reading the ‘second influence’ of General Rules as involving a ‘new direction of the very same principle’ (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 149), rather than as a conflict between rules or sets of rules with distinct contents. However, Martin does not treat this as a matter of voluntary reflection, so much as a mechanical procedure of ‘self-correcting’ (Martin, ‘The Rational Warrant for Hume’s General Rules,’ 249).²³ According to Martin, just as the ‘first influence’ of the General Rules involves ‘higher-order custom’ (Martin, ‘The Rational Warrant for Hume’s General Rules,’ 250), by which we come to form causal beliefs on the basis of their conformity with principles (even if those principles are unknown by those who are instinctually employing them), the ‘second influence’ of general rules is yet ‘another, even *higher-order*, set of rules to guide our application of the first general rules’ (ibid). These ‘higher-order’ rules are supposedly developed after we *naturally* come to believe that the beliefs formed using only the General Rules in their ‘first influence’ are frequently false, i.e. prejudicial. As I read Martin this sort of regulation is supposed to be a mechanical feedback mechanism, rather than the result of *voluntary reflection*.

My reading of the General Rules should also be contrasted with the account of them recently provided by Jack C. Lyons. I follow Lyons in reading Hume’s General rules as *extensive*, i.e. based on a large number of experiences, and *constant*, i.e. for which experience has provided few or no apparent exceptions (see Lyons, ‘General Rules and Justification,’ 259). But Lyons argues that these two conditions are themselves sufficient for distinguishing the ‘good

²³ For another interpretation in this family see Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 93-100.

general rules' from the 'bad general rules' (ibid., 258). I instead claim that this is no difference in the rules themselves, i.e. no difference in their *contents*, but only a difference in the degree to which they have been applied to a rich range of remembered and imagined cases. On my reading a prejudice is simply a general rule, naturally applied, but one that hasn't yet been raised to the level of consciousness. My claim is that this process requires willing to the degree that remembering and imagining require willing. No more, and no less. I generally agree with Lyons that the difference between the 'first influence' and the 'second influence' is a matter of the rules' relative extensiveness and constancy, as Lyons defines those. Each is a slightly more precise way of accounting for how a General Rule can have an application that is more general.²⁴ But what accounts for the enhanced generality of what Lyons calls 'the good rules,' as opposed to the prejudices?

In fairness I should point out that Lyons' project is somewhat broader than mine has been here. He sought to explain how the General Rules are related to epistemic norms and can be justified in Hume's epistemology. Reading the same passages I have,²⁵ wherein Hume clearly associates reflection with the 'second influence,' Lyons is more hesitant than I am about drawing the conclusion that Hume's official view was that General Rules exercise their regulatory function via that reflection. Claiming that Hume was 'not entirely clear' on this point, Lyons also quotes the following passage to suggest that Hume, in other places, seemed less than enthusiastic about consciously considered rules for the direction of judgement:

²⁴ Cf. Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 148-49.

²⁵ Lyons cites T 1.3.10.12; SBN 632, and T 3.3.1.15; SBN 582.

Here is all the LOGIC I think proper to employ in my reasoning; and perhaps even this was not very necessary, but might have been supply'd by the natural principles of our understanding. Our scholastic head-pieces and logicians show no such superiority above the mere vulgar in their reason and ability, as to give us any inclination to imitate them in delivering a long system of rules and precepts to direct our judgment, in philosophy.

(T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175)

Because this passage also nicely encapsulates one of Hume's characteristic philosophical attitudes it provides me with an opportunity to explain, in conclusion, why I do not read it as inconsistent with Hume's frequent references to 'reflection' on the General Rules. Nothing Hume wrote (or that I have attributed to him) regarding that reflection would require 'a long system of rules and precepts' in order to direct one's judgement. One of the most important features of Hume's naturalism is that General Rules are 'supply'd by the natural principles of our understanding' rather than by 'scholastic headpieces and logicians.' And one of the most important features of his account as I have interpreted it above is that such rules do *not* have different content in their 'second influence,' but are only more thoroughly applied (in Lyons' terminology they are more *extensive* and *constant*) to a broader range of remembered and imagined cases. Lyons is able (in his own words) to 'remain neutral' on the question of whether the General Rules are consciously reflected upon or tacitly believed (Lyons, 'General Rules and Justification,' 257). But I am not. I have argued that Hume thought finer causal discrimination is precisely the benefit of *voluntary reflection*.

5. CONCLUSION

While a number of people have recognized a problem in Hume's theory of belief, a fewer number have exonerated him. We should, at the end of the day, acquit Hume of the inconsistency attributed to him by philosophers like Price.²⁶ I am not unique in providing a defense in this regard; I take myself only to have provided an interpretation of the evidence that makes it uniquely exculpatory. A defense could have been accomplished merely by distinguishing first-order from second-order doxastic voluntarism, i.e. the distinction necessary to preserve Hume's first-order involuntarism and make room for his normative commitments with respect to how we ought to believe. But such a distinction is reinforced by Hume's own account of the General Rules, which despite being 'natural principles of our understanding,' *ought* to be reflected upon in order to aid in the discrimination of genuine causes. Even were there no such language in Hume, or were we to otherwise take seriously his attempt at thoroughgoing mechanism, we would have made progress in explaining his account of belief-formation. So whether one reads the General Rules as Hearn and Falkenstein do, or as Martin does, or as Lyons does, (or as I do), one will have made some headway with the Problem of Believing Wisely.

The advantage of my reading over those others is that I have also explained why we ought to reflect upon the General Rules and give them their 'second influence,' rather than merely leave them to their first. It is because that further step away from prejudice and towards causal discrimination, if not wisdom itself, is not guaranteed by nature. It requires *volunteers*. Wisdom doesn't simply happen to us, but is instead something we must value and do. There are limits, of course, to such an explanation. While perhaps compatible with some form of mechanism, this voluntarist reading is not itself mechanistic. But even philosophers like

²⁶ On this point I simply follow a trail blazed by others. See, for example, Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 213-16.

Falkenstein and Owen must eventually leave off providing a thoroughly mechanistic account of Hume, e.g. of explaining why he thought some of us naturally possess more curiosity than others, or why some of us choose to appreciate the skeptical arguments while others do not. It is true that some people appear to be naturally, and not merely voluntarily, more reflective. But explanations of such facts were not provided by Hume himself.

In conclusion it might be worthwhile to reflect on the kind of doxastic compatibilism to which the General Rules commit Hume. Famously, he thought a first-order act may be both ‘free’ and ‘necessitated,’ insofar as it can be simultaneously determined by the will, and fit into a reliable pattern of more or less constant conjunctions. Beliefs, on the other hand, are willed by us insofar as they are both the product of a natural mechanism, i.e. the ‘first influence’ of the General Rules, but also reflectively endorsed, i.e. willed as the ‘second influence’ of those very same General Rules. I have argued that Hume thereby denies global doxastic involuntarism, but I have not meant to draw the further conclusion about whether Hume was or was not a local doxastic involuntarist. Is there a particular idea or set of ideas for which no amount of reflection on the natural processes by which it has (or they have) come to be believed can possibly augment or diminish its (or their) believability? A candidate for such a set, over which we have little direct control, are those most closely associated with the present impressions. The involuntarist passages cited above (in Sec. II) are suggestive in this regard. But this is not the conclusion that I have sought to establish in this paper.

Despite the textual evidence cited above (in Sec. II), David Hume was not a global doxastic involuntarist. This is the conclusion that ought to be drawn from close attention to his General Rules. Unlike others’, my reading comes at the price of Hume’s involuntarism. But I take myself to have done a bit more than merely emphasize the hidden willing at the heart of

Hume's beliefs. I take myself to have also shed light on why it might prove ineluctable. It was not only required by Hume's epistemic normativity, but is also necessary for explaining the mechanism Hume himself posited for distinguishing wise from unwise beliefs. Without voluntary reflection there could be no 'second influence' of the General Rules, hence only instinct, prejudice, and parochial custom. Hume's naturalism, and the linkage of the deliberative with the voluntary in traditional theories of judgement, motivated him to provide a largely involuntarist theory of belief. But Hume was unable to provide a thoroughly involuntarist theory of belief. What I have argued in this paper is that voluntarism sneaks back into his account, through the General Rules.

Hume was a second-order doxastic voluntarist, i.e. he thought that we are free to believe what we will, at least to the degree that we are 'free' to control the environment in which we place ourselves, and consequently the impressions and expectations we naturally form as a result. But it is also important, for anyone who would take Hume seriously, to notice that the statement of *that* position, alone, does not yet fully capture his view. His view, I can say now, was even more *voluntarist* than that. His view was that individual experiences are insufficient to make us wise. What is additionally required is a degree of reflection on the process of experience itself (which is not to rule out such reflection as a consequence of the process!), including a powerful memory and a rich imagination of possible alternatives, and the true generality of causal knowledge that results.²⁷

²⁷ This paper is indebted to a variety of people for their voluntary reflection on its own 'first influences': Kit Andrews, Allison Glasscock, Karl Hickerson, Ken Kirby, Michael Tiboris, Saul Traiger and Corliss Swain. I would especially like to thank the editors of this journal, and a series of anonymous referees, for helpful and incisive criticisms. I am originally indebted to Wayne Martin, for inspiring me to seriousness about Hume's theory of belief.

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