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Doxastic Virtues in Hume's Epistemology

RICO VITZ

Abstract: In this paper, I elucidate Hume's account of doxastic virtues and offer three reasons that contemporary epistemologists ought to consider it as an alternative to one of the broadly Aristotelian models currently offered. Specifically, I suggest that Hume's account of doxastic virtues obviates (1) the much-debated question about whether such virtues are intellectual, "moral," or some combination thereof, (2) the much-debated question about whether people have voluntary control of their belief formation, and (3) the need to make the kind of thick metaphysical commitments about essentialism and final causation that Aristotelian accounts of such virtues require.

A lively and interesting debate has emerged over, roughly, the past century concerning the virtues, and related vices, of belief formation—that is, the process that includes the way in which people conduct their inquiries, the way in which they acquire their beliefs, and the way in which they fix their beliefs. This debate has been of special interest to philosophers working in virtue epistemology, in general, and to virtue responsibilists—who conceive of the virtues of belief formation as good character traits—in particular.¹ Despite its many excellent qualities, the debate has been surprisingly narrow in at least one respect. To the extent that its participants articulate accounts of the virtues of belief formation, they tend, overwhelmingly, to employ essentially Aristotelian models.² Notably missing from their discussions is a serious and comprehensive engagement with Hume's account of such virtues.

The purpose of this paper is to remedy this defect in the current debate. To be clear: my aim is *not* to show that contemporary epistemologists ought to adopt Hume's conception of doxastic virtues.³ That would require a more detailed treatment both of his account and of contemporary virtue epistemology than I will be able to give here. Rather, my aim is to elucidate Hume's account of doxastic virtues and to explain three principal reasons that contemporary epistemologists ought to consider it as an alternative to one of the broadly Aristotelian models currently offered. In brief, I will suggest that Hume's account of doxastic virtues obviates

- (1) the much-debated question about whether such virtues are intellectual, "moral," or some combination thereof,⁴
- (2) the much-debated question about whether people have voluntary control of their belief formation,⁵ and
- (3) the need to make the kind of thick metaphysical commitments about essentialism and final causation that Aristotelian accounts of such virtues require.

1. Hume's Account of Doxastic Virtues

Before I explicate the potential benefits of Hume's position for contemporary virtue epistemology, let me provide a brief overview of his account. Both in the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*, Hume exhibits a general concern with the virtues and vices of belief formation. In the *Treatise*, for instance, he says, "No weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call credulity, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others," and he claims that this vice rashly "commands our assent beyond what experience will justify" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 112).⁶ He refers to the "universal carelessness and stupidity of men" in which "they show as obstinate an incredulity as they do a blind credulity on other occasions" (T 1.3.9.13; SBN 113). Noting the influence of passions on people's beliefs, he suggests that the vulgar are easily persuaded by "quacks and projectors" (T 1.3.10.4; SBN 120), and he identifies such credulity as something for which they ought to feel "ashamed" (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267). In a related vein, but with respect to a different problem, he suggests that dogmatism is a quality that is unbecoming of a good reasoner (cf. T 1.4.7.15; SBN 273–74). In fact, throughout the latter half of T 1.3,⁷ Hume not only develops his account of what belief is, but also suggests guidelines both for how to form beliefs in ways that invite people's approbation and for how to avoid forming beliefs in ways that invite their disapprobation.

Similar themes appear in the first *Enquiry*. In the opening section, he suggests that his project is one in which he addresses the "proper province of human reason," and he describes it as one that could be useful for all readers. He says,

Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy, fitted for all persons and all dispositions; and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to *careless reasoners*, and gives it the air of science and wisdom. (EHU 1.12; SBN 12–13, my emphasis)⁸

In the final section, he describes “just” reasoners as mitigated sceptics who are cautious and modest in forming their beliefs (EHU 12.24; SBN 161–62). Throughout the first *Enquiry*, he argues that failure to follow the “rules of just reasoning” is vicious, and that one who fails to reason “justly” instantiates vices like “supine indolence of the mind,” “rash arrogance,” “lofty pretensions,” and “superstitious credulity” (cf. EHU 5.1; SBN 41).

However, his concern with the virtues and vices of belief formation is probably most evident in his discussions of topics concerning religion, such as his writings on miracles, on immortality, and on the existence of God. In his essay on miracles, Hume repeatedly assesses people as virtuous or vicious with respect to their beliefs. He describes people who proportion their beliefs to the evidence as “wise” (EHU 10.4; SBN 110). In light of his argument, he claims that “no man of sense” could believe in miracles (EHU 10.19; SBN 119). Moreover, he suggests that a “wise” and “judicious” reader of history would be skeptical of reports of miraculous events (EHU 10.21; SBN 119–20). In fact, a principal theme of Hume’s essay on miracles is the distinction between believers who are “wise” and “learned,” and those who are “fools” (cf. EHU 10.22, 29; SBN 120, 125). In effect, his work on miracles is, in large part, an essay on virtuous belief formation in which he sets out the “rules of just reasoning” that should govern people’s assent and keep them from “knavery” and “credulity” (cf. EHU 10.1, 26; SBN 109, 124).

Throughout his discussions of immortality in the *Treatise*, in the first *Enquiry*, and in his *Essays*, Hume manifests a deep concern with doxastic vices. He laments people’s credulity (T 1.3.9.13; SBN 113). He criticizes their inability to conform to the “rules of just reasoning” (cf. EHU 11.13, 23, 26; SBN 136, 142, 145). He contends that the “just reasoner,” who is committed to “sound philosophy,” does not exhibit “a rash curiosity” in attempting to establish the “speculative dogmas” of superstitious religion, which, he implies, leads from “freedom and toleration” to “pertinacious bigotry” (cf. EHU 11.2, 3, 10, 18, 27; SBN 132–33, 135, 139, 146; *Essays*, 73–79).⁹ Therefore, in various contexts,¹⁰ Hume assesses people as virtuous or vicious for the way in which they form their beliefs.

2. Doxastic Virtues as neither Intellectual nor ‘Moral’

Given the tenor of the recent debate about the virtues of belief formation, it would be natural for some contemporary readers to ask for clarification: is Hume

offering an account of intellectual virtues, an account of moral virtues, or some hybrid account of virtues? To ask such a question, however, presupposes that an analysis of the virtues of belief formation must take place in Aristotelian terms. As I will explain presently, Hume's response is not to answer the question but to reject it. In so doing, I will clarify how his account of doxastic virtue obviates the much-debated question about whether such virtues are intellectual, moral, or some combination thereof.

Hume appeals to the distinction between intellectual virtues and moral virtues only once in either the *Treatise* or the *Enquiries*. While discussing the proper application of the term "virtue," he says, "Should we lay hold of the distinction between intellectual and moral endowments, and affirm the last alone to be the real and genuine virtues, because they alone lead to action; we should find that many of those qualities, usually called intellectual virtues, such as prudence, penetration, discernment, discretion, had also a considerable influence on conduct" (EPM App 4.2; SBN 313). Thus, the only time Hume discusses the distinction between intellectual virtues and moral virtues, he appears to do so for the purpose of disavowing it.

However, given how deeply imbued this distinction is in the current debate, it would be natural for contemporary readers to press for further clarification regarding Hume's rejection of it: if, on Hume's account, virtues in general and doxastic virtues in particular are neither intellectual nor moral, then what are they? In an attempt to help make Hume's position clearer to such an interlocutor, let me describe it in a bit more detail.

Hume's account of virtue is heavily influenced by Cicero and other ancient philosophers, who count as virtues "every laudable quality or endowment of the mind" (EHU App 4.11; SBN 318). Consequently, in his examination of the principles of morals, Hume

propose[s] simply to collect on the one hand, a list of those *mental qualities* which are the object of love or esteem, and form a part of *personal merit*, and on the other hand, a catalogue of those qualities, which are the object of censure or reproach, and which detract from the character of the person, possessed of them; subjoining some reflections concerning the origin of these sentiments of praise or blame. (EPM App 4.1; SBN 312, my emphasis)

Lest his readers misunderstand, Hume highlights the fact that, on his account, virtues are "durable" or "constant" principles of an agent's mind "which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character" (cf. T 3.1.2.3, 3.3.1.4; SBN 471, 575; EPM 8.1n50, App 1.10; SBN 261n1, 289). Examples of such qualities include wisdom, "judgment," "good sense," "sound reasoning," "prudence," and

“that sagacity, which leads to the discovery of truth,” which are valued either because they are *useful* or *agreeable* to the person “possess’d of them” or to others (see, for example, T 3.3.4.7; SBN 611; EPM 8.7, App 4.11; SBN 263, 318). According to Hume, virtues such as these are part of a person’s character and constitute part of his or her *personal merit* (see, for example, EPM 8.7, App 4.5–6; SBN 263, 316; cf. T 3.3.4.13; SBN 613).

3. Doxastic Virtues without Voluntary Control

Again, however, given the tenor of the recent debate about the virtues of belief formation, it would be natural for some contemporary readers to ask for clarification: by identifying virtue with personal merit, is Hume not mistakenly suggesting that people are morally responsible for their belief-forming character traits—at least insofar as people lack voluntary control over such traits? The apparent confusion seems to stem from the lack of a common understanding, between Hume and his critics, both of personal merit and of the corresponding notion of responsibility. In this section, I will explain each of these two misunderstandings and clarify how Hume’s account of doxastic virtue obviates the much-debated question about whether people have voluntary control of their beliefs.

Assuming that we have to find a contemporary category with which we might label Hume’s account of personal merit, we should regard it not as a “moral” account but as an “ethical” account, in the technical sense of those terms suggested by the work of G.E.M. Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams and others. In general, a “moral” account of personal merit refers to a modern species of ethical concern that, in Williams’s words, “makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; [and] without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice.”¹¹ More specifically, for present purposes, a “moral” account of personal merit differs from an “ethical” account insofar as the former, unlike the latter, conceives of merit principally in categorically binding, *legal* terms¹²—as suggested, for example, by the familiar phrase, “the *moral law*.”¹³

Regardless of what one takes to be the strengths or weaknesses of such an account, it is clearly *not* the one endorsed by Hume. In the fourth appendix of the second *Enquiry*, he addresses the reason “why modern philosophers have often followed a course, in their moral enquiries, so different from that of the ancients.” According to Hume, in modern times,

philosophy of all kinds, especially *ethics*, have been more closely united with theology than ever they were observed to be among the Heathens; and as this latter science admits of no terms of composition, but bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose, without much regard to

the phenomena of nature, or to the unbiassed sentiments of the mind, hence reasoning, and even language, have been warped from their natural course, and distinctions have been endeavoured to be established, where the difference of the objects was, in a manner, imperceptible. Philosophers, or rather divines under that disguise, *treating all morals, as on a like footing with civil laws*, guarded by the sanctions of reward and punishment, were necessarily led to render this circumstance, of voluntary or involuntary, the foundation of their whole theory. Every one may employ terms in what sense he pleases: But this, in the mean time, must be allowed, that sentiments are every day experienced of blame and praise, which have objects beyond the dominion of the will or choice, and of which it behoves us, if not as moralists, as speculative philosophers at least, to give some satisfactory theory and explication. (EPM App 4.21; SBN 322, my emphasis; cf. T 3.3.4.1ff.; SBN 606ff.)

On Hume's account, personal merit consists not in conforming one's actions to a categorically binding moral law, but "in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself, or to others" (EPM 9.1; SBN 268).

This fundamental difference between a "moral" account of personal merit, on the one hand, and Hume's "ethical" account, on the other, coincides with a similar difference about conceptions of *responsibility*. Let me briefly map a bit of the conceptual terrain so that I can elucidate the difference with greater clarity.

People can be responsible for various states of affairs in a *descriptive* sense or in a *normative* sense. Consider, for instance, the case of a school bully who pushes a young girl onto a cardboard box, which crumbles under the young girl's weight. Who is responsible for crushing the box? The way in which the young girl in the example contributed to this state of affairs, at least on the brief description I have offered, is irrelevant to her personal merit. She is responsible in a merely descriptive, causal sense, in the same sort of way that a key, turned by the hand of a driver, is responsible for starting the engine of a car. The school bully, on the other hand, is responsible for this state of affairs both in a descriptive sense and in a normative sense. His pushing the girl not only resulted in the crushing of the box, it also harmed the girl, manifesting an aspect of his personal merit.¹⁴ It is responsibility in the normative sense that is particularly relevant to Hume's account of virtue, in general, and doxastic virtue, in particular, so it is on that kind of responsibility that I will focus in what follows.

To say that people are responsible for their beliefs, in a normative sense, may imply any of three things. First, it may imply that people are the proper objects of inquiries concerning the reasons, if any, for which they hold certain beliefs.¹⁵ Second, it may imply that, with respect to belief formation, people are the proper objects of attributions of ethical terms, such as "wise" or "foolish," as well as the

proper objects of certain natural forms of reproach, like anger or resentment. Third, it may imply that, with respect to belief formation, people are the proper objects of reward or punishment—in particular, the kind of retributive punishment that Hume believes the “divines” have in mind.¹⁶ Call the first kind of responsibility *answerability*; the second, *attributability*; and the third, *accountability*.¹⁷

Hume does not develop his account of doxastic virtue with a focus on whether people can give reasons for what they believe. In fact, a central feature of his account is that people can form beliefs—say, about causal relations—virtuously despite the fact that they may not be able to give reasons for their beliefs. Moreover, as the previously cited passage from EPM App 4.21 suggests, he explicitly rejects an account of virtue that treats “all morals, as on a like footing with civil laws, *guarded by the sanctions of reward and punishment*” (SBN 322, my emphasis). Rather, his concern is with the proper application of the terms associated with people’s sentiments of approbation or disapprobation (cf. EPM App 1.10; SBN 289; T 3.3.5.1; SBN 614). Therefore, his principal concern is neither with answerability nor with accountability, but with attributability.

So far in this section, I have begun to develop a picture of Hume’s accounts of personal merit and of responsibility. This picture, however, might only seem to *support* the objection raised at the opening of this section: namely, that Hume mistakenly suggests that people are morally responsible for their belief-forming character traits—at least insofar as people lack voluntary control over such traits. To show that this seeming support is, in fact, illusory, let me say a bit more about the nature of attributability, in general, and about Hume’s conception of attributability, in particular.

Many conceptions of responsibility as attributability fall into one of two, broad categories. According to conceptions of the first sort, to say that people are responsible for their beliefs means that people are the proper object of attributions of ethical terms because of a certain relationship that their beliefs have to their faculty of will: namely, either (i) their beliefs were formed by some prior voluntary acts, or (ii) they voluntarily choose to identify with the ways in which their beliefs were formed, or (iii) they can voluntarily choose to maintain or to eradicate the beliefs. According to conceptions of the second sort, to say that people are responsible for their beliefs means that people are the proper object of attributions of ethical terms because of a certain relationship that their beliefs have to their faculty of reason. Call a conception of the first sort a *voluntarist view of attributability* and a conception of the second sort a *rationalist view of attributability*.¹⁸

Hume contends that voluntary control is irrelevant to people’s personal merit and virtue (see, e.g., EPM App 4.21; SBN 322; T 3.3.4.1ff.; SBN 606ff.), thereby denying that people are the proper object of attributions of ethical terms because of a certain relationship that their beliefs have to their faculty of will. Moreover, he recognizes that people can form beliefs virtuously by custom, or by memory,

or by moral sentiment,¹⁹ thereby denying that people are the proper object of attributions of ethical terms merely because of a certain relationship that their beliefs have to their faculty of reason. Therefore, he endorses neither a voluntarist nor a rationalist view of attributability. Rather, his conception of attributability falls into a third, broad category. Call it a *sentimentalist view of attributability*. According to Hume's sentimentalist view, to say that people are responsible for their beliefs means that people are the proper object of attributions of ethical terms because they form their beliefs by means of mental qualities that are useful or agreeable to themselves, or to others (see, e.g., EPM 9.1; SBN 268; cf. EPM App 1.10; SBN 289; T 3.3.5.1; SBN 614).

The charge of Hume's critics—namely, that by identifying virtue with personal merit, Hume mistakenly suggests that people are morally responsible for their belief-forming character traits, at least insofar as people lack voluntary control over such traits—seems to evince a failure to understand Hume's accounts of personal merit and of responsibility. If Hume endorsed a "moral" account of personal merit and a corresponding conception of responsibility as accountability, then he would be guilty as charged. However, given his endorsement both of an "ethical" account of personal merit and of a sentimentalist view of responsibility as attributability, he eludes the charge of inconsistency. Hume's critics may complain that the charge should be understood as suggesting *not* that Hume's account of doxastic virtue is *inconsistent* but that it is *false*. Given the status of the debates among ethicists about the nature of virtue and about the nature of responsibility, however, the charge that Hume's account of doxastic virtue is false is rather contentious. Thus, it fails to establish a compelling reason to disregard Hume's account as a possible alternative to one of the broadly Aristotelian accounts currently offered. Therefore, one will have to look elsewhere to find convincing evidence for selecting between Hume's account of doxastic virtue and its Aristotelian competition.

As I noted in the introduction, my aim in this paper is to explain three principal reasons that contemporary epistemologists ought to consider Hume's account as an alternative to one of the broadly Aristotelian models currently offered. I elucidated the first of these reasons in the previous section. Let me close this section by highlighting the second. By endorsing both an "ethical" account of personal merit and a sentimentalist view of responsibility as attributability, Hume offers an account of doxastic virtue that disregards concerns with voluntariness. In so doing, he offers an account of doxastic virtue that obviates the much-debated question about whether people have voluntary control of their belief formation. Therefore, Hume's account of doxastic virtue is not only of, at least, comparable merit with respect to its Aristotelian competition concerning questions about the nature of virtue and the nature of responsibility. It seems to have even greater merit than its competition insofar as it avoids the challenge of doxastic voluntarism. Moreover, it seems to be stronger on other grounds, as I will show presently.

4. Doxastic Virtues without Thick Metaphysical Commitments

In this final section, I will explain how Hume's account of doxastic virtue obviates the need to make the kind of thick metaphysical commitments to essentialism and to final causation that Aristotelian accounts of such virtues require. To do so, I will elucidate and contrast Aristotelian accounts of virtue and their thick metaphysical commitments, which I will clarify in section 4.1, with Hume's account of doxastic virtue with its thin metaphysical commitments, which I will clarify in section 4.2.

4.1 Aristotelian Accounts of Virtue and Their Thick Metaphysical Commitments

One of the beauties of Aristotle's work is that it is remarkably systematic. On his account, the various organic beings that populate the universe are members of natural kinds because of their substantial forms. Their substantial forms supply their final causes and, thus, their proper functions. The proper functions of these beings account for the nature of their respective virtues. For instance, on Aristotle's account, a man is a human being because of his substantial form and, most importantly, because of his intellective soul. His intellective soul distinguishes him from other animals and supplies his unique, human function: namely, to reason. This ability to reason explains the kind of virtue that is unique to him as a member of his species: namely, to engage in an activity in accord with reason or requiring reason. Thus, the classical Aristotelian account of ethics, in general, and of human virtue, in particular, are dependent both on Aristotelian natural science and, ultimately, on Aristotelian metaphysics.

A scholastic Aristotelian account is similar. A man is a human being because of his soul, which is the substantial form of the body, distinguishes him from other animals, and supplies his function: namely, to reason, in general, and to know God in the beatific vision, in particular. Hence, as in the classical Aristotelian account, a scholastic Aristotelian account of human virtue is dependent both on Aristotelian natural science and, ultimately, on Aristotelian metaphysics.

A contemporary Aristotelian account may differ in its conception of natural science but it would seem to maintain its commitment to explaining virtue in terms of functions proper to a being's natural kind. For instance, Rosalind Hursthouse's account of virtue focuses "on evaluations of individual living things as or qua specimens of their natural kind."²⁰ She continues, faithful to Aristotle, claiming both that

a good social animal . . . is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to (i) its parts, (ii) its operations, (iii) its actions, and (iv) its desires and emotions; whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether

these four aspects serve (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group—in ways characteristic of the species,²¹

and that human beings are social animals that are characteristically rational.²² Hence, a contemporary Aristotelian account such as Hursthouse's, may abandon the traditional Aristotelian commitment to substantial forms but not, ultimately, a similar commitment both to essentialism and to the corresponding conceptions of proper function and of final causes. Thus, as on the classical and on the scholastic Aristotelian accounts, a contemporary Aristotelian account of human virtue would seem to be dependent, ultimately, on some version of Aristotelian metaphysics.

Therefore, the various Aristotelian accounts currently available in the debate about doxastic virtues seem to depend on what I will call a set of thick metaphysical commitments. By "a set of thick metaphysical commitments," I have in mind, minimally, a commitment both (i) to natural kinds, explained in terms of the essences of various beings, and (ii) to proper function, explained in terms of an Aristotelian conception of final causation.

4.2 Hume's Account of Doxastic Virtue with Its Thin Metaphysical Commitments

How does Hume's account of doxastic virtue differ? Let me begin to answer that question by analyzing a belief-forming norm that Hume identifies at the end of the first Book of the *Treatise*. Following Don Garrett, I will refer to this norm as the *Title Principle*: "Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate on us" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270).²³ The norm seems, clearly enough, to suggest that reason is a reliable guide for forming beliefs, at least under certain conditions. However, two things about the norm are unclear: namely, (i) what "reason" is and (ii) what these conditions are, or what it means for reason to be "lively" and to mix "itself with some propensity." As I will show, clearing up these ambiguities reveals a conception of doxastic virtue with thinner, and thereby potentially less problematic, metaphysical commitments than its Aristotelian competition.

What is "reason"? According to Hume, "reason" is "a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect" (T 1.4.1.1; SBN 180, my emphasis). More specifically, as Owen notes, it "is not some independent faculty, but rather a subset of principles of the imagination, those principles responsible for our demonstrative and probable reasonings."²⁴ Thus, what Hume calls "reason" is a cognitive mechanism²⁵ aimed at truth²⁶ by which a person makes true judgments by means of demonstrative or probable inferences. For reasons that I will make clear, below, it is important to note

that Hume identifies “reason” as *a*, not *the*, cognitive mechanism that is aimed at truth. This is because on Hume’s account there are other cognitive mechanisms with that aim: for example, memory, sense perception, the moral sense, and so forth (see, for example, *Essays*, 241–43, 247; cf. T 3.3.4.13; 3.3.6.3; SBN 612–13, 619; EHU 10.1; SBN 109).

What does it mean to say that reason “is lively and mixes itself with some propensity”? Hume differentiates the liveliness that an idea has when we believe it from the liveliness that an idea has when we read poetry. He says,

A poetical description may have a more sensible effect on the fancy than an historical narration. It may collect more of those circumstances that form a complete image or picture. It may seem to set the object before us in more lively colours. But still the ideas it presents are different to the feeling from those which arise from the memory and the judgment. There is something weak and imperfect amidst all that seeming vehemence of thought and sentiment which attends the fictions of poetry. (T 1.3.10.10; SBN 631)

Thus, Hume uses the term “lively” and its cognates—as well as associated terms, like “force,” “vivacity” and their cognates—to refer to something more than simple “vigour of conception.” Hence, to say that an idea is “lively” is not merely to say that it affects or agitates the mind strongly.

Hume promises his readers that he will go on to elucidate more clearly the difference between “poetical enthusiasm” and “serious conviction,” but he fails to deliver on that promise (cf. T 1.3.10.11; SBN 631). He does, however, note two points regarding the kind of “liveliness” that is constitutive of beliefs about matters of fact. First, in such beliefs, the “liveliness” of ideas has as its source the principle of custom acting on “something real”—specifically, an impression (T 1.3.10.11; SBN 631). Second, in such beliefs, the “liveliness” of people’s ideas causes them to act as if such ideas were true. The case is quite different, though, with those ideas that people conceive “vigorously” as the result of poetical enthusiasm: they only “lend [themselves] . . . to the fiction” for the purpose, say, of enjoying a night at the theater (cf. T 1.3.10.11; SBN 631). Therefore, Hume concludes, the liveliness associated with serious conviction differs from the “liveliness” of poetical enthusiasm “both in its causes and in its effects” (T 1.3.10.11; SBN 631). The cause of the liveliness of beliefs about matters of fact is the principle of custom acting on a present impression; the effects include certain propensities, like commanding people’s assent and influencing their actions (see, for instance, T 1.3.7.7; SBN 629; EHU 5.11; SBN 48; cf. T App 2; SBN 624). Beliefs concerning relations of ideas presumably differ with respect to the cognitive mechanism that is the cause of their liveliness, but not with respect to their effects.

Thus, according to the *Title Principle*, people make judgments virtuously by means of reason if and only if their beliefs have three notable characteristics. The first is a *quality*: such beliefs are lively, as opposed to being merely “vigorously conceived.” The second is a *cause*: such beliefs are produced by a properly functioning cognitive mechanism the natural effect of which is to produce true and thus, as a rule, useful beliefs. The third is an *effect*, or a *set of effects*: such beliefs have a propensity, for example, to command people’s assent or to influence their actions.

At first glance, my description of the second characteristic of the *Title Principle* might seem rather problematic for two reasons. First, it might seem to attribute to Hume a conception of teleological explanation that he rejects, for example, in his claim that appeals to final causes are “pretty uncertain & unphilosophical”²⁷ as well as in his claims that “all causes are of the same kind” and that “there is no foundation for that distinction which we sometimes make . . . betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material, and exemplary, and final causes” (T 1.3.14.32; SBN 171). Second, it might seem to attribute to Hume a conception of things having “proper functions” that he must reject, given his rejection of final causes. Thus, my description of the second characteristic of the *Title Principle* might seem to attribute to Hume one member of the very set of thick metaphysical commitments that I claim he denies.

As I will now show, however, each of these problems is merely apparent. First, although Hume clearly has misgivings about the *scholastic Aristotelian conception of final causation*, he evidently does not have similar misgivings about speaking of causes that tend towards some effects, as I noted above. My description of the second characteristic of the *Title Principle* relies on nothing more than Hume’s own implicitly teleological explanation of the nature of reason at T 1.4.1.1 (SBN 180; cf. *Essays*, 241–43, 247). Moreover, my use of the phrase “properly functioning” in my description of the second characteristic of the *Title Principle* depends on nothing more than Hume’s conception of a cause tending to its natural effect. As I am using the terms, to say that a “properly functioning” mechanism is “aimed at” *x* is to say nothing more than that in mature, healthy human beings, the natural effect of the mechanism is *x*. In essence, I am referring to properly functioning cognitive mechanisms with particular aims merely in an attempt to explain what Hume regards as mental health—and alludes to in various comments on madness as well as on the defects, disorders, diseases, and perversions of certain mental faculties.²⁸ Thus, in stating the *Title Principle*, Hume does commit himself to what we might call a thin, or metaphysically “stripped down,” version of teleological explanation and proper function.²⁹ However, he makes neither a thick metaphysical commitment to final causation, implicit in various Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, nor a thick metaphysical commitment to proper function, explained in terms of an Aristotelian conception of final causation.

The foregoing explication and defense of the *Title Principle* is particularly important for my argument since, as I will show next, the *Title Principle* is a specific formulation of a more general principle concerning doxastic virtue. The *Title Principle* is concerned specifically with judgments people make by means of reason. Hume, however, assesses people as virtuous or vicious with respect to their belief formation when they have beliefs that are produced by cognitive mechanisms other than reason. Consider just one example. Hume suggests that people are virtuous with respect to their belief formation when they make certain judgments about the conduct of others—for example, that a father who fails to take care of his children is behaving inappropriately (cf. T 3.2.5.6, 3.3.3.9; SBN 518, 606). According to Hume, however, such beliefs are originally produced not by reason, but by a different cognitive mechanism, which he identifies as “moral taste,” “moral sentiment,” “taste,” “sentiment,” or the “moral sense.”³⁰ In the case of the person who makes a judgment about a father acting inappropriately towards his children, the person has a lively idea of the father acting inappropriately and such an idea commands his or her assent. In fact, a principal difference between this belief and, say, the belief that, as a general rule, all simple ideas are copies of simple impressions is the nature of the cognitive mechanism by which the person makes the judgment—moral sense in the former case, reason in the latter. These two beliefs share the same *quality* and the same *effect*, but not the same *cause*. Yet Hume contends that people who make each of these judgments do so virtuously. Thus, Hume endorses a belief-forming norm with a broader scope than the *Title Principle*.

In fact, since he acknowledges that truth is, perhaps, “too much to be hop’d for” (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272), he does not even confine himself to claiming that people form their beliefs virtuously *only* by means of properly functioning cognitive mechanisms the natural effect of which is to produce true beliefs. Rather, he seems to think that people can form their beliefs virtuously by means of other cognitive mechanisms the natural effect of which is to produce beliefs that are useful for the conduct of common life.

In effect, Hume’s *Title Principle* seems to be a version of a more general principle. Call it Hume’s *Virtuous Belief Principle*: A person believes that *p* virtuously if and only if he or she affirms, or is habitually disposed to affirm, an idea representing *p*, which

- (1) manifests a certain *set of belief-making qualities*, such that it is not merely “vigorously conceived,” but is truly “forceful,” “lively,” “vivacious,” “firm,” “steady,” “stable,” and so forth,
- (2) has a “durable” or “constant” *cause* that produces its belief-making qualities, such as either
 - a. a properly functioning cognitive mechanism the natural effect of which is to produce true beliefs, or

- b. a properly functioning cognitive mechanism the natural effect of which is to produce useful beliefs; and
- (3) has an *effect*, or *set of effects*, such that it has a propensity, for example, to command people's assent or to influence their actions.³¹

So, according to Hume, those who form their beliefs virtuously do so if and only if they satisfy the three conditions of the *Virtuous Belief Principle*; however, those who form their beliefs in such a way that they fail to satisfy these conditions might not do so *viciously*. Consider, for instance, a person who desires a role in a community theater production. His desire might cause his reason to function improperly, thereby producing the false belief that he has an outside chance of being cast in an upcoming play.³² As a result, he might take two minutes to submit a brief online application for an audition. Subsequently, he might neither worry nor wonder whether he will get an audition because he regards his chances of success as reasonably low. His belief is of no great importance, even to him, and the consequences of the actions resulting from it are almost completely insignificant. Hence, the man forms his belief in a way that fails to satisfy the second condition of the *Virtuous Belief Principle*; however, he does so without manifesting "durable" or "constant" principles of mind that are deleterious or disagreeable to himself or others. Therefore, on Hume's account, although the man did not form the belief virtuously, he did not do so viciously. Nonetheless, Hume certainly thinks there are ways of violating the *Virtuous Belief Principle* by which one does manifest "durable" or "constant" principles of mind that are deleterious or disagreeable to himself or others.

Thus, Hume offers an account of doxastic virtue that appeals neither (i) to natural kinds, explained in terms of the essences of various beings, nor (ii) to proper function, explained in terms of an Aristotelian conception of final causation. Consequently, Hume's account of doxastic virtue obviates the need to make the kind of thick metaphysical commitments about essentialism and final causation that Aristotelian accounts of such virtues require.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to elucidate Hume's account of doxastic virtues, and in so doing, to explain three principal reasons that contemporary epistemologists ought to consider it as an alternative to one of the broadly Aristotelian models currently offered. More specifically, I attempted to show that Hume's account of doxastic virtues obviates

- (1) the much-debated question about whether such virtues are intellectual, "moral," or some combination thereof,

- (2) the much-debated question about whether people have voluntary control of their belief formation, and
- (3) the need to make the kind of thick metaphysical commitments about essentialism and final causation that Aristotelian accounts of such virtues require.

To the extent that I have succeeded in presenting a compelling case, I have provided a potential benefit for current debates both in virtue epistemology and in the ethics of belief since his account of doxastic virtues is one that contemporary epistemologists have not engaged, seriously and comprehensively. Whether Hume's account of such virtues is more plausible than its Aristotelian competition may, now, become an open question. Perhaps his account will fail to measure up to its competition. At the very least, however, it deserves a place in the discussion.

NOTES

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1 For a helpful statement of the distinction between virtue responsibilists and virtue reliabilists, with references to the relevant aspects of the secondary literature, see Jason Baehr, "Character, Reliability, and Virtue Epistemology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 191–92; cf. Guy Axtell, "Recent Work in Virtue Epistemology," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 1–26; Lorraine Code, "Toward a Responsibilist Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1984): 292–50.

2 See, for example, *Knowledge, Belief, and Character*, ed. Guy Axtell (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover: University Press of New England and Brown University Press, 1987); *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, ed. Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); John Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

3 To avoid potentially misleading connotations, I will refer to Hume's account of the virtues of belief formation neither as "intellectual virtues" nor as "epistemic virtues," but as "doxastic virtues."

4 For some of the classic moves in the debate, see, for instance, Roderick M. Chisholm, "Lewis' Ethics of Belief," in *The Philosophy of C. I. Lewis*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1968), 223–42, as well as his "Firth and the Ethics of Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51 (1991): 119–27; W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief Debate*, ed. Gerald D. McCarthy (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 19–36; Roderick Firth, "Chisholm and the Ethics of Belief," in *In Defense of Radical Empiricism: Essays and Lectures by Roderick Firth*, ed. John Troyer (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 143–53, as well as his "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts" in *In Defense of Radical Empiricism: Essays and Lectures by Roderick Firth*, ed. John Troyer (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 237–49; Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 20ff.; Susan Haack, "'The Ethics of Belief' Reconsidered," in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 21–33; William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), 186–208.

5 As an anonymous referee rightly suggests, Hume claims both that people do not have direct voluntary control over their judgments and that such control is not necessary for attributions of doxastic virtue or vice. Since I do not specifically address Hume's view on doxastic voluntarism, in this paper, I defend merely the claim that his account of doxastic virtues makes it unnecessary to answer the question of whether people have voluntary control of their beliefs—see section 3, below.

6 References to Hume's *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) and are abbreviated as "T," followed by the Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers of the relevant passage. Each reference also uses the abbreviation "SBN" to note the corresponding page(s) in the second edition prepared by Selby-Bigge and revised by Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

7 Specifically, T 1.3.8–15 (SBN 98–176).

8 References to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), and are abbreviated as "EHU," followed by the section and paragraph numbers of the relevant passage. Each reference also uses the abbreviation "SBN" to note the corresponding page(s) in the third edition prepared by Selby-Bigge and revised by Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Similarly, references to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), and are abbreviated as "EPM," followed by the section and paragraph numbers of the relevant passage. Like references to the first *Enquiry*, each reference to the second *Enquiry* also uses the abbreviation "SBN" to note the corresponding page(s) in the third edition prepared by Selby-Bigge and revised by Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

9 See also his comments at the end of "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (*Essays*, 598)—cf. T 1.3.9.14; SBN 114–15. References to Hume's *Essays* are to David Hume, *Essays, Moral*,

Political, and Literary, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987) and are abbreviated as *Essays*, followed by the page number of the relevant passage.

10 In the interest of brevity, I have largely, though not exclusively, confined my comments in this section to Hume's *Treatise* and his first *Enquiry*. His *History of England*, however, is another noteworthy source of Hume's concern with what he regards as the vicious way in which some notable people form their religious convictions. See, for example, his discussions of Thomas Becket (HE 1:306–38), Joan of Arc (HE 2:397–410), Martin Luther (HE 3:134–42), John Knox (HE 4:22–44, 72–73), and George Fox (HE 6:142ff.). References to the *History of England* are to David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, with a foreword by William B. Todd, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1983) and are abbreviated as "HE," followed by the volume and page numbers of the relevant passage.

11 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006), 196; cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 26–44; originally published in *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

12 Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 30–31; cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 174–96.

13 Which one can find in conceptions of morality as different as the natural law theory of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see, e.g., §§1950–53) and the deontological theory of Kant's second *Critique* (5:161).

14 Or, more strictly speaking, his personal *demerit*.

15 Cf. Pamela Hieronymi, "Responsibility for Believing," *Synthese* (2008): 357–73.

16 Regarding Hume's theory of punishment, see Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 137–53.

17 My choice of the terms "reproach," "resentment," "punishment," "attributability," and "accountability" evinces the fact that my *elucidation* of Hume's account of responsibility is influenced by the explanations of responsibility given by Robert Adams, Peter Strawson, and Gary Watson—see, for instance, Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *The Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 3–31; Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 1–25; Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility," *Philosophical Topics* 24.2 (1996): 227–48; cf. Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, 71–84; Angela Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115 (2005), 236–71. However, my *reading* of Hume's account, like those of other commentators, is based not on the works of Adams, Strawson, and Watson, but on the position Hume articulates in his texts—especially, for instance, T 3.3.1.30–1, 3.3.4.1ff. (SBN 590–91, 606ff.); and EPM App 4.21 (SBN 322).

18 Cf. Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes."

19 I will elaborate on this point, below, in section 4.2.

20 Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 197.

21 *Ibid.*, 202.

22 Ibid., 222.

23 Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 234–35; cf. Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 217–18.

24 Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 201.

25 See also Falkenstein, “Hume’s Project in ‘The Natural History of Religion,’” 4; Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 207. For related comments concerning a number of belief-forming mechanisms that Hume “endorses,” see Loeb, *Stability and Justification*, 13, 58.

26 I will address, below, what might seem to be the problematic teleological overtones of the phrase “aimed at truth.”

27 David Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 33; cf. David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), 205.

28 See, for instance, T 1.1.1.1; 1.1.1.3; 1.3.10.9, 10; 3.1.2.8 (SBN 2, 9, 123, 474, 630–31); EHU 2.1; 12.11 (SBN 17, 153); EPM 7.24 (SBN 258); NHR 6.3; 12.1, 14.8; *Essays*, 74, 233–47, 268, 365; cf. EHU 2.7 (SBN 20); *Essays*, 178. For related discussions in the secondary literature, see, for instance, Lorne Falkenstein, “Naturalism, Normativity, and Scepticism in Hume’s account of Belief,” *Hume Studies* 23 (1997): 41; James Noxon, “Hume’s Concern with Religion,” *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 9 (1976): 80–81; Jessica Spector, “Value in Fact: Naturalism and Normativity in Hume’s Moral Psychology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41 (2003): 145–64; see also Christopher Bernard, “Hume and the Madness of Religion,” in *Hume and Hume Connexions*, 224–39.

29 Cf. John Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 105–47; Paul Hoffman, “Does Efficient Causation Presuppose Final Causation? Aquinas versus Early Modern Mechanism,” in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, ed. Larry Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 295–312.

In an interesting and provocative paper, Kevin Meeker defends a view which might seem to imply that even this metaphysically “stripped down” version of teleological explanation and proper function is incompatible with Hume’s broader philosophical project and, hence, that my interpretation of Hume is problematic—see Meeker, “Was Hume a Proper Functionalist?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 120–36; cf. Michael Rea, *World without Design* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 108–27.

Let me make three brief notes in reply. First, since (i) Meeker is concerned with the merit of attributing to Hume a *proper functionalist theory of knowledge* like the one Alvin Plantinga defends and (ii) that is not what I am doing in this paper, it is not clear that his critique applies to my interpretation. Second, even if his critique does apply, I am not convinced that the metaphysically “stripped down” version of teleological explanation and proper function that I attribute to Hume is incompatible either with his account of normativity or with his account of causation, as Meeker’s view might seem to suggest. Third, even if the metaphysically “stripped down” account that I attribute to Hume were incompatible with his broader philosophical project, it is not clear that this would reveal a problem *with my interpretation*. Charity can only extend so far, and it may be the case that Hume has inconsistent views on various topics and, hence, that there are competing, plausible but not fully satisfactory readings of his work. In fact, I

submit that the current state of the secondary literature is reasonably strong evidence that this is, indeed, the case. In any event, sorting out these intriguing issues is well beyond the scope of the present paper.

30 Making this point is the purpose of the first two sections of the third book of the *Treatise* as well as a principal focus of the second *Enquiry*—see, for example, T 3.3.1.15, 25; SBN 581, 588; EHU 8.31; SBN 99. Note, though, that although Hume contends that such beliefs are *originally produced* by “moral sentiment,” he recognizes that they can be influenced and refined by reason—see, for instance, EPM App1; SBN 285ff.

31 I take it that Hume endorses the *Virtuous Belief Principle* as a ‘general maxim.’ That is, I suspect that he would be willing to grant that clever philosophers might be able to conceive of exceptions to the principle but that he would regard such cases as so trivial that they would be “scarce worth our observing” and would not merit that “we should alter our general maxim” (cf. T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6).

32 Cases of people overestimating their virtues, abilities, and so forth are reasonably common—see, for example, T. Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 77; cf. Al Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 1, 40–41; see also Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

