

Stability and Skepticism: An Action-Based Interpretation of Hume's Notion of Belief

Abstract

In this paper I argue for two theses. First I argue that, for Hume, an agent cannot be said to believe that *p* if that agent would not act upon *p* in the relevant circumstances. This action-based account of belief builds upon a stability-based account, found in Loeb (2002), which holds that belief is not merely characterized by “force, liveliness, and vivacity” but more fundamentally by stability. Beliefs must be steady dispositions which display consistent effects upon thoughts, passions, and actions. While following Loeb's account I develop more systematically the connection between belief and action by showing that Hume draws a distinction between *pretended belief* and *genuine belief*. This distinction is detailed most thoroughly at T 113-115. Hume asserts that the “Roman Catholics” who act in opposition to their professed beliefs regarding a “future state,” do not really hold such beliefs. Thus, for Hume, one can be mistaken about whether or not a belief is genuinely held. A necessary condition for genuine belief is that it would be, for the agent in question, acted upon in the appropriate circumstances. Thus simply professing to believe some proposition is not sufficient for it to be a genuine belief.

Secondly, I argue that the action-based interpretation can explain how Hume ultimately comes to reject skepticism in *Treatise* 1.iv.7, and why we must accept natural beliefs. I argue that for Hume skepticism is not *practicable*; meaning it is not a belief which one is capable of acting upon. Skepticism undermines the possibility of action by calling into disbelief the objects of the external world, and the causal structure of our experience. Since (i) belief requires action and (ii) skepticism cannot be acted upon, it follows that (iii) skepticism cannot be assented to. Furthermore the realization that one cannot act upon skeptical beliefs makes these beliefs cause mental anguish, and forces the acceptance of natural beliefs.