

ABSTRACT

## **Belief and Doubt in David Hume**

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### **UNMITIGATED SCEPTICISM REVISITED**

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The relation between the sceptical and the natural capacities, constituting the human condition, is the most fundamental problem of Hume's epistemology. In recent decades, the prevailing tendency has been to deny the essential incompatibility between them and to support a picture of Hume in which his scepticism and his naturalism can be to some extent reconciled. This line of argument is – roughly speaking – twofold. Drawing on the concluding sections of his *Enquiry*, an emphasis is placed on Hume's concept of mitigated scepticism that is seen not as having a paralysing effect on epistemology, but rather as having an "educational" role: making us aware of the limitations of reason and teaching us to think and behave with more modesty and tolerance. This way of downplaying Hume's scepticism could be considered pragmatic. Or, ambiguities in Hume's sceptical views on causality and the existence of the external world are sought throughout his writings, showing that he was never consistently and extremely sceptical anyway but was a realist of sorts. This position, represented most prominently by the "New Hume Debate", attempts a philosophical resolution of Hume's scepticism.

I shall propose (with a reference to Popkin) a more radical interpretation of Hume's epistemology defending the view that the clash between reason and nature or between doubt and belief is irreconcilable; these two capacities of the human constitution stand against each other in a sharp dichotomy, yet never at work simultaneously, thus saving us from a permanent schizophrenic state. Hume's unmitigated scepticism has intriguing implications for the role left for philosophy - dethroning it from the traditional status of higher wisdom, denying it the (Cartesian) methodological privilege of delivering certain knowledge, and not granting it any normative status of a guide to thought and action.