HUME AND WITTGENSTEIN

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It is well known that Wittgenstein's reading of the philosophical classics was patchy. He left unread a large part of the literature which most philosophers would regard as essential to a knowledge of their subject. Wittgenstein gave an interesting reason for his non-reading of Hume. He said that he could not sit down and read Hume, because he knew far too much about the subject of Hume's writings to find this anything but a torture.¹ In a recent commentary, Peter Hacker has taken this to show that 'Wittgenstein seems to have despised Hume'. Hume, he adds, 'made almost every epistemological and metaphysical mistake Wittgenstein could think of.'²

There is a good deal to be said for this contrast. To understand what the later Wittgenstein was arguing against, we can, in many cases, do no better than turn to the writings of Hume. And often we can best understand the nature and implications of Hume's views by considering them in the light of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. But perhaps this is not what Wittgenstein had in mind when he gave his reason for not being able to read Hume. Perhaps what he meant was that Hume was too close to his own position. Is this conceivable? In what follows I shall try to show that it is.

In presenting my argument I shall, inevitably, be selective; preferring those passages from the two philosophers which favour my thesis to those that go against it. I have no desire, however, to dispute the validity of the contrasts that are usually drawn between Hume and Wittgenstein. My aim is only to show that they also had certain fundamental things in common, and that these things are important enough to be worth bringing out.

To begin with, consider some general points of style and attitude, for

² P. M. S. Hacker, Insight and Illusion, p. 218.
example the way in which Hume *wrestles* with his material. It is true that
he has many long passages of 'straight' exposition, in which he seems to
reach definitive conclusions with confident ease. But against this there are
the well-known passages, especially in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, and in
the Conclusion of Book I, in which he reveals his uncertainties, confesses
the shortcomings of his work, and imparts to us a sense of intense struggle.
These features bear comparison with what we find in the work of the later
Wittgenstein. So also does the way in which certain key topics come up
again and again in different parts of the work; in Hume's case, topics like
belief and causality; in Wittgenstein's, topics like the idea of a mental
process or entity. The sense of struggle that we find here is not a mere
device for developing the argument in a more interesting way. We are made
to feel that the problems of Hume and Wittgenstein really are, for them,
problems of great difficulty and of central importance.

Both Hume and Wittgenstein were concerned with what we might call
the 'mental welfare' of the philosopher. They saw and described the
bizarre mental states which lay in wait for anyone who engaged in
philosophical reflection along certain very tempting lines. And they saw
that what was needed was not (as G.E. Moore sometimes thought) the
refutation of a wrong conclusion, but rather some kind of therapy. It was
not that the sceptical philosopher, for example, had simply made an error in
his reasoning, and could therefore be corrected; it was rather that his view,
though in a sense unassailable, was set in the wrong light. What was needed
was to be rescued from seeing things in a false perspective, from attaching
the wrong sort of significance to the premisses and conclusions of the
sceptic's argument.

**SCEPTICISM**

Only a superficial or biased reading of Hume's work could lead anyone to
conclude that Hume was little more than a sceptic, that scepticism is his
main conclusion. Such an interpretation is hardly conceivable since the
appearance of Kemp Smith's essay on Hume in 1905.\(^1\) Perhaps it would be
an exaggeration to say that Hume was no more a sceptic than Wittgenstein;
but I hope to show that there would be *something* in such a claim.

Hume's great aim was to show that beliefs and morals had their basis in
facts of human nature, and his scepticism was intended to further this aim.
'My intention', he wrote,

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\(^1\) *Mind* (1905). See also his book, *The Philosophy of David Hume*. I have made
much use of these two works. I have also found very useful Richard H. Popkin's
e ssay 'David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism', *Philosophical
Quarterly* (1951) reprinted in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell.