

Reason Unhinged

Passion and Precipice from Montaigne to Hume

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To illustrate a point about general rules in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume instructs us to imagine what he calls “a familiar instance,” the “case of a man, who being hung out from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forbear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, tho’ he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling” (1.3.13.10; T 148).¹ Why does Hume characterize this case as a familiar instance, when it appears to be a rather unusual scenario? In what follows, I will show that precipice thought experiments were common fare in a philosophical debate about the relation between reason and the passions by Hume’s predecessors. Hume’s treatment of the precipice phenomenon is an important contribution to that debate.

I say that such thought experiments were common in a philosophical debate about the relation between reason and the passions to emphasize that this debate is one among many. Certainly, the most widely discussed of these debates today centers on the question of whether reason is merely instrumental in practical reasoning, and thus, as Hume famously put it, is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions (2.3.3.4; T 414). Arguments

from precipice phenomena by Hume and his predecessors do not broach this important issue. Rather, they concern a separate issue, one addressed today by cognitive psychologists and other cognitive scientists. The issue is as follows: is situated causal reasoning, understood as causal reasoning carried out in ordinary situations, independent of affect, where “independent” means that we can make judgments about causes and effects which judgments are not themselves influenced by our affective states? Montaigne and other philosophers with whom Hume was familiar deployed precipice examples to support one of the following claims: (1) Affective mechanisms can lead to beliefs which we must embrace, but which are incompatible with the beliefs we are led to by causal reasoning. (2) Affective mechanisms make it impossible to form beliefs that would be arrived at through reasoning in the absence of the affective response. Hume’s predecessors argued for a form of epistemological skepticism based on endorsing both these claims. Hume does not draw the skeptical conclusion, because while he accepts (1), he rejects (2). Thus, Hume’s treatment of precipice cases suggests that the passions can be integrated with, and even contribute to, proper cognitive processing.

If you place a sage “on the edge of a precipice,” Montaigne wrote in his *Essays*, “he must shudder like a child.”² Citing the Platonic and Stoic traditions, Montaigne offers this example as counterevidence to a view that took reason as a faculty wholly separate from and superior to the senses, imagination, and the passions. Even the philosopher, one who exercises reason and attempts to form beliefs through reason alone, Montaigne argues, is subject to the influence of the emotions. That influence is one that shuts down cognition, making reasoning impossible. Fear of falling prevents the philosopher from making the correct inference, namely that he is not in danger.

When he reintroduced Montaigne’s example a century later, Pascal regarded reason and the imagination as separate faculties, each producing beliefs, but with the imagination often winning out and leaving the individual with false beliefs.

Put the world’s greatest philosopher on a plank that is wider than need be: if there is a precipice below, although his reason may convince him that he is safe, his imagination will prevail. Many could not even stand the thought of it without going pale and breaking into a sweat.³

Presumably, the “greatest philosopher in the world” is someone guided by reason, rather than by the irregular operations of the imagination and the passions. Place a philosopher on the precipice, and reason is unhinged. In such cases, we judge not by reason, but by the operation of our passions and imagination. Other experiences which can unhinge reason, according to Pascal, include “the sight of cats or rats, the crushing of a coal.”

For both Pascal and Montaigne, the philosopher-on-the-precipice example supports a form of skepticism about reason. Reason is not all it’s cracked up to be; its verdict is readily displaced by the imagination and the passions. Both philosophers assume that reason, undisturbed, would yield the appropriate belief. Reason correctly tells us that we are safe on the precipice, yet we tremble. Imagination and the passions give us the wrong answer. Our trembling on the precipice is inappropriate.

Montaigne and Pascal employed the precipice example to argue against a conception of reason as a faculty that operates in isolation from other aspects of the human mind and the human body. Montaigne adds an admonition from Terence to the Stoics: “Let him think nothing human foreign to him.”⁴ In short, we cannot transcend our bodily human nature, our nonrational responses to our physical environment. Neither Montaigne nor Pascal explains the nature of the interaction and the conflict, the possible benefits of the influences of the passions, or how reason reaches the right conclusions and how the imagination blocks the inferences that lead to them.

In *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes explicitly treats the passions and reason as separate faculties. Reason is wholly nonphysical, but, notoriously, Descartes held that reason still influences the body through the pineal gland.⁵ The passions, in contrast to reason, are bodily, not mental; they can arise from sensory stimuli. When we see a lion, for example, the brain forms an image of it which is available both to the soul, which performs the cognitive processing of the image, and to the passions, which respond to the image based on past experience:

If, in addition, this shape is very strange and terrifying—that is, if it has a close relation to things which have previously been harmful to the body—this arouses the passion of anxiety in the soul, and then that of courage or perhaps fear and terror, depending on the particular temperament of the body or the strength of the soul, and upon whether we have protected ourselves previously by defence or by flight against

the harmful things to which the present impression is related. Thus in certain persons these factors dispose their brain in such a way that some of the spirits reflected from the image formed on the gland proceed from there to the nerves which serve to turn the back and move the legs in order to flee.⁶

The account Descartes develops here is generalized to all the passions. Spirits in the brain affect the nerves and the blood, and the brain also receives feedback from both systems which, in turn, sustain or modify the passions. These bodily processes develop as habitual responses to stimuli, and require no cognitive intervention or support. Passions are a “mere disposition of the organs.”⁷

Passions can direct human action, however. If reason is not directing the will and pushing on the pineal gland, then the passions move in and exert their influence at the gland, thus affecting the body. The passions, then, do not compete with reason; they simply take over when we are not exercising it. Fear, Descartes argues, is typically caused by surprise, and can be avoided by the exercise of forethought. So, reason and passion compete for control of the body at the pineal gland, but the integration of affective and cognitive functions is one-way. Reason can quell the passions, but not vice versa.

Although Descartes did not discuss the precipice phenomenon, we can see what he might have said about it by examining a related case he does discuss. Descartes offers the following argument for the claim that any passion can be controlled by reason. Consider the behavior of animals. Dogs typically run toward partridges and away from loud sounds. But one can train a setter not to run from a gun and not to run toward a partridge. If the passions of animals can be modified without the resources of reasoning, Descartes argues, human passions can be even more easily modified with the assistance of reason. As dispositions of the organs, our passions are plastic.⁸

Montaigne and Pascal held that the precipice phenomenon is compelling evidence that some passions will displace our best reasoning. In contrast, Descartes thought any passion would yield to reason properly exercised. The philosopher on the precipice might tremble initially, but like a good setter, he can be trained to not feel fear on subsequent trips to the summit. The disagreement is not about how ordinary persons react to heights. Descartes does not think that ordinary folk use reason to overcome their passions. Rather, it is the philosopher, or other careful users of reason, who

can overcome the passions. In contrast, Montaigne and Pascal claim that *even the philosopher*, the individual well practiced in the use of reason, will find that his reason is unhinged in the precipice case and similar situations.

In spite of these differences, the three philosophers share the assumption that reason and the passions are separate and competing faculties, with reasoning occurring in the mind, emoting and imagining in the body. Further, in spite of their insistence that reason cannot be separated from the passions, Pascal and Montaigne have very little to say about the relation between mind and body, reason and passion. Descartes' account of the separation is problematic in a number of ways. How do the passions register the cognitively rich images to which they respond? How can reason train the passions? Does the setter example really support the claim that reason can *always* overcome the effects of the passions?

Nicolas Malebranche attempted to explain how passions interface with reason in terms of "brain traces"—changes in the fibers of the brain. Like Descartes, Malebranche takes the mind to be wholly separate from the body. Although there are brain traces "connected" to the mind's ideas, the mind can have its ideas without knowing that there are such traces, indeed without knowing that it has a brain. There are three kinds of connections between ideas and brain traces. First, there are what Malebranche calls "natural connections." The connection between the idea of a tree and the brain trace one has when seeing a tree is a connection of this kind. The second type is a connection involving "identity," which, for Malebranche, consists of brain traces that happen to occur, but need not occur, simultaneously with some occurrence of an idea. If I heard Frank Sinatra sing "My Way" when I first saw the Grand Canyon, for example, then the song will always lead me to some idea, perhaps confused, of the Grand Canyon. Finally, certain idea-brain trace connections are due to the will. Language-idea connections are willed. The fact that a certain sequence of sounds or characters which produces a particular brain trace or traces regularly corresponds to a particular idea is due to our desire to communicate and the employment of our will to achieve such communication.⁹

These three types of connections have different degrees of strength. The natural connections are the strongest; the willed connections, the weakest. Malebranche suggests that this is why it is sometimes easier to explain something through a visual demonstration than by offering a verbal account. A verbal account depends on a willed connection of brain traces of words

and ideas; a visual demonstration exploits the natural connection of perceptual brain traces and ideas. Also, the more we abstract, using unfamiliar symbols to represent concepts, as we do in mathematics, the more difficult it is for the mind to grasp those ideas.

There are mutual connections among traces, as well as connections from traces to ideas and to emotions, and these connections can be either “identity” or “natural” connections. If two traces are “imprinted at the same time,” then, when one of them recurs, so will the other. The natural connections among brain traces are hardwired into us because such an organization is necessary to the preservation of life. The precipice phenomenon is offered as an example of such a connection. Malebranche writes:

For example, the trace of a great elevation one sees below oneself, and from which one is in danger of falling, or that of a large body, about to fall on us and crush us, is naturally tied to the one that represents death to us, and to an emotion of the spirit that disposes us to flight and to the desire to flee. This connection never changes, because it is necessary that it be always the same, and it consists in a disposition of the brain fibers that we have from birth.¹⁰

In Malebranche’s hands, the precipice example has changed from one concerning the philosopher on the precipice to a claim about all human agents. In further contrast to Pascal and Montaigne, the threat of the precipice is real in Malebranche’s example. It is clear, however, that Malebranche is providing grounds for Montaigne and Pascal’s claim that the philosopher on the precipice cannot reason his way out of the fear of falling. The connection between perceiving the precipice and the emotion of fear “never changes,” either for the ordinary person or for the careful reasoner. Malebranche is at odds with his strongest intellectual influence, Descartes.

In Malebranche’s example, there is more going on than a connection of mutual brain traces; there are connections among brain traces, representations, and emotions. The visual stimulus of the precipice is connected with both the representation of the precipice in thought, and the affective response of the body. Unfortunately, Malebranche says little about how these different faculties are related and how they conspire to achieve the resultant fear. His main point is the surprisingly anti-Cartesian one that the affective response is hardwired and immune to change by reasoning. Still,

Malebranche's understanding of the precipice case, though confused, represents an advance over Montaigne and Pascal's treatment. Malebranche recognizes that the case involves not only the imagination or the passions, but both. Further, he seems to hold that there is some sort of belief or pattern recognition at work. One recognizes the precipice as a precipice, and this "represents death to us." But it also seems clear that for Malebranche, the belief or representation of the precipice is only an epiphenomenal link. It is the "*trace* of a great elevation," not the *idea* of it which gets things going, and the rest follows automatically and without further cognitive processing.¹¹ This fits with Malebranche's celebrated view that we see all things in God. There is no real connection from perceptions to ideas. God, rather than the external world, is the source of all of our ideas.

Immediately after the precipice example, Malebranche takes on Descartes' passion-plasticity example:

All the connections that are not natural can be and should be broken, because different circumstances of time and place are bound to change them so that they can be useful to the preservation of life. It is good that partridges, for example, flee from men with guns in places and times they are being hunted, but it is not necessary that they flee at other times and places. Thus, it is necessary for the conservation of all animals that there be certain connections of traces that can easily be formed and destroyed, and that there be others that can be broken only with difficulty, and finally, still others that can never be broken.¹²

Malebranche concedes that some affective responses are plastic, but those necessary for survival are not. Interestingly, he anticipates Darwin's views on affective brittleness as well as subsequent speculation about the cognitive value of such hardwired affects.¹³

To summarize the historical discussion thus far, philosophers whose works were well known to Hume frequently discussed questions about the relation of cognition and affect.¹⁴ They were particularly concerned about whether cognition can overcome inappropriate affective responses to our environment. The dominant view, with Descartes dissenting, was that cognition cannot always overcome the effects of the passions and the imagination. When we tremble on the precipice we simply cannot reason our way out

of our fear. Further, this inability demonstrates the separation of mind and body. Our passions are bodily, and our mental states are powerless to redirect them.

By the time Hume takes his turn discussing fear on the precipice, the example is so well known that he refers to it as a “familiar instance.” It is found in his “Of Unphilosophical Probability,” in a discussion of the influence of general rules on belief. Although lengthy, the passage deserves quotation in full:

To illustrate this by a familiar instance, let us consider the case of a man, who being hung out from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forbear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, tho’ he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling, by his experience of the solidity of the iron, which supports him; and tho’ the ideas of fall and descent, and harm and death, be deriv’d solely from custom and experience. The same custom goes beyond the instances, from which it is deriv’d, and to which it perfectly corresponds; and influences his ideas of such objects as are in some respect resembling, but fall not precisely under the same rule. The circumstances of depth and descent strike so strongly upon him, that their influence cannot be destroy’d by the contrary circumstances of support and solidity, which ought to give him a perfect security. His imagination runs away with its object, and excites a passion proportion’d to it. That passion returns back upon the imagination and enlivens the idea; which lively idea has a new influence on the passion, and in its turn augments its force and violence; and both his fancy and affections, thus mutually supporting each other, cause the whole to have a very great influence upon him. (1.3.13.10; T 148–49)

Reasoning from experience, that is, from the constant conjunction of being suspended from an iron cage (and of being on platforms “attached” to something “of the solidity of iron”) and yet not falling, yields a vivid idea of safety, though not of “perfect security.”¹⁵ The imagining of “depth and descent” brings about the passion of fear, which increases the vivacity of the idea of depth and descent. One cognitive process, causal reasoning, yields a high-vivacity idea of our safety. Another process, involving imagination and the passions, yields a high-vivacity idea of our danger. The resulting doxastic

instability is due to the incompatibility of our competing ideas of safety and danger. Which process should we follow? If beliefs are themselves sentiments or feelings, then why should we prefer causal reasoning to the influence of the passions?

Can reason, on Hume's conception of it, be set in opposition to our passions and sentiments when beliefs, the products of reason, are, as Hume famously held, themselves sentiments? In many passages Hume emphasizes the similarities of belief and passion, rather than their differences.¹⁶ In the first *Enquiry* he says that beliefs, like other sentiments, "must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture."¹⁷ At the very end of Book II of the *Treatise*, he notes that belief produces the same pleasure ("though in a lesser degree") as that which arises from moderate passions (2.3.10.12; T453). Not only is reasoning passion-like, but the passion's mechanisms are reason-like: the passions of admiration and surprise which the vulgar experience in commerce with "quacks and projectors" can so vivify their ideas that they come to resemble "the inferences we draw from experience" (1.3.10.4; T120). It is tempting to conclude that the conflict between reason and passion is really just a conflict among passions and that the contrast of distinct faculties vying for attention and control vanishes. Everything becomes a matter of affect.¹⁸

In my view, Hume is not in danger of merging reason and passion in this way. Beliefs are indeed feelings or sentiments; they are lively ideas. The key difference is the way our beliefs are formed, in contrast to the formation of our other sentiments. Beliefs can share phenomenological features with sentiments without being *mere* sentiments.¹⁹ While beliefs and other sentiments arise from what Hume calls situations of the mind, his accounts differentiate these situations. The difference will occupy center stage in Hume's final explanation of the precipice phenomenon.

Hume faces another potential problem in attempting to account for the conflict evident in the precipice case. In the same passage where he calls reason the slave of the passions, he says that passions have no representative quality, and thus cannot be opposed to belief (2.3.3.5; T 415). Still, that does not prevent our passions from aiding and abetting the imagination in the formation of lively ideas that are opposed to the deliverances of reason. Hume says that the "passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are accompany'd with some judgment or opinion" (2.3.3.6; T 416). This may seem a weak conflict, but, I will argue, it is a significant one. It appears that

nonreasoning mechanisms play an important role in bringing about high-vivacity ideas that can be fully opposed to beliefs formed by causal reasoning. In reference to the precipice phenomenon Hume claims that fear “produces a species of belief.”²⁰ So, the conflict which interests him is not a conflict of passions or a conflict between belief and passion, but rather a case of incompatible beliefs.

In dealing with the precipice phenomenon, Hume has an advantage over his predecessors, insofar as he has a unified account of belief and the passions. The passions, the imagination, and reason can all affect the vivacity of our ideas. But this very feature makes it difficult to see how Hume can, as he will, challenge the skeptical position of Montaigne, Pascal, and Malebranche that the passions unhinge reason in the precipice case.

The precipice example, in Hume’s hands, is not merely a simple conflict of reason and passion. Hume does not think a direct opposition is possible. The passions do not work alone in opposition to reason; they are aided by the imagination. The idea of depth and descent originates in the imagination and is then stoked by the passions. The passion-enlivened idea “returns back upon the imagination,” resulting in a new passion and thereby enlivening the idea. The process is cyclical, continually increasing the vivacity of the idea of depth and descent. There are two important insights here: (1) the conflict is between the union of passion and imagination against causal reasoning, and (2) the passion/imagination process reiterates. Reason seems to be no match for the imagination aided by passion. The idea of safety will be a less vivid idea than the continually passion-enriched idea of depth and descent.²¹ The skeptical position seems to find support here.

The point of Hume’s example might merely be that the imagination can gain temporary control of our judgment, which is a species of unphilosophical probability. Reason eventually steps in to make the necessary corrections. Instead, with Robert Fogelin, I read the section as setting up a genuine conflict of belief-forming mechanisms.²² Fogelin, however, thinks that Hume’s resolution is a skeptical one: there are no grounds for accepting the deliverances of reason over those of passion and imagination. I see the case as a difficult challenge for Hume’s naturalism, but one he can meet. Just as superstitions, understood as the products of natural causes and the social interaction of epistemic agents, can be epistemically assessed by an analysis of those very origins, so, too, we can correct the influence of high-vivacity ideas based on passion and imagination. If all Hume has to offer

is the claim that we attend to the deliverances of reason and ignore the passion-enriched imagination, then he hasn't advanced beyond Descartes.

Hume agrees with his predecessors that the influence of passion and imagination on a person on the precipice is great. There is no reason to think that the vivacity of the idea of falling is less than that of one's safety. Indeed, Hume's way of describing the situation suggests that the idea of depth and descent may be more lively than the idea of safety. Elsewhere he suggests that beliefs always have higher vivacity than ideas of the imagination, but he is in no position to make that claim here, and he does not.²³

Before Hume can resolve the conflict between the understanding and the imagination, he needs to say something about the difference between the two faculties. Surprisingly, however, Hume only further emphasizes their similarities:

According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by inlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object. It may, therefore, be concluded, that our judgment and imagination can never be contrary, and that custom cannot operate on the latter faculty after such a manner, as to render it opposite to the former. (1.3.13.11; T 149)

Here "all reasonings" includes both the understanding, which produces the idea of safety, and the imagination, which produces the idea of depth and descent. The latter idea is the result of custom. We have experience of precipices and of falling. The circumstance of being hung out over the precipice adds to the idea's vivacity, and thus we do a bit of causal reasoning and infer that we are in danger. The precipice example is Hume's illustration of the fact that "custom takes the start, and gives a bias [*sic*] to the imagination" (1.3.13.9; T 148).

To appreciate that the idea of depth and descent is the result of a custom, Hume suggests that we simply examine the relevant regularities and determine their relative strengths. This will enable us to resolve the conflict among the deliverances of these equally natural, but not equally efficacious, faculties. The practice of determining the relative strengths of the parallel customs requires reflection and general rules. When we have beliefs in the absence of competing high-vivacity ideas, we often simply embrace those beliefs without reflection. But when there is a conflict, reflection is forced

on us. Either we are safe on the precipice, or we are going to plummet to our deaths. It becomes imperative to reflect on the circumstances under which the competing ideas are formed and, by seeing both ideas as the effects of causes, to distinguish the “accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes” (1.3.13.11; T149).

How are we to distinguish accidental circumstances from efficacious causes? Both the imagination and reason fall under general rules, and both generate lively ideas. Hume calls the effects of the regularity of the two faculties the “first influence of general rules.” That is, there are general rules that govern the formation of the high-vivacity ideas of security on the precipice and general rules governing the formation of the high-vivacity ideas of depth and descent. Reflection on these two sets of rules is possible and, in case of a contest, necessary. The “second influence of general rules” involves our reflective judgments about the first rules. We discover that the imagination is accidental and irregular, (though still rule governed) while the understanding is “more general and authentic” (1.3.13.12; T 150).

Fogelin challenges Hume to provide grounds for the claim that the beliefs provided by the understanding are “general and authentic,” while those of the imagination are merely “accidental and irregular.” Hume classifies fear as a direct passion, a passion arising from the contemplation of possible evils. Fear contrasts with hope, which follows the contemplation of possible pleasures. The degree of fear or hope that we experience is a function of both the severity of the anticipated evil or pleasure and the judgment of the likelihood of the occurrence of evil or pleasure. The more likely an evil, the more our imagination will turn to it. The more severe the anticipated evil, the more lively our idea of it will be. This suggests that part of our reflection on, and correction of, our sentiments of fear and hope are the assessments of the initial judgments of probability that we make when we experience the direct passion in question. Consider the precipice example: the pit-of-the-stomach “I’m going to fall” feeling does not, thankfully, precede an actual incident of falling in most cases. It is not an a priori truth that the imagination provides an idea without a predictive punch; it is merely an empirical fact, discovered by causal reasoning .

Hume had already mentioned the interplay of passion and probability in Book I, “Of the Influence of Belief.” There, while famously emphasizing that belief “is nothing but a more vivid and intense conception of any idea” (1.3.8.11; T 119–20, emphasis Hume’s), he also introduces several examples

in which one can distinguish the respective contributions of passion and probability. The coward “readily assents to every account of danger.” This suggests that the coward on the precipice is one who would already have a high-vivacity idea of anticipated pain, which communicates vivacity to the idea of falling, raising it to the level of a belief that he will fall.²⁴

Precipice phenomena are treated in closely related passages in the *Treatise*, the second *Enquiry*, and the *Dissertation on the Passions*. Surprisingly, Hume does not say that fear of falling is a combination of the low probability of falling compensated by the lively terror of falling. Rather, he says that we can fear the impossible as well as the improbable. In the *Treatise* Hume writes:

But they are not only possible evils, that cause fear, but even some allow'd to be *impossible*; as when we tremble on the brink of a precipice, tho' we know ourselves to be in perfect security, and have it in our choice whether we will advance a step farther. This proceeds from the immediate presence of the evil, which influences the imagination in the same manner as the certainty of it wou'd do; but being encounter'd by the reflection on our security, is immediately retracted, and causes the same kind of passion, as when from a contrariety of chances contrary passions are produc'd. (2.3.9.23; T 445)

This precipice passage is very close to those of Montaigne, Pascal, and Malebranche, and by characterizing the evil as impossible, Hume seems to be agreeing with them that such fear is opposed to reason.²⁵ However, Hume means not strict logical impossibility, but very low probability, due to the fact that falling would require an act of the will that we are strongly inclined not to take, namely, to “advance a step farther.” The so-called impossibility of falling is initially overcome by the strength of the imagination's idea of falling. Experience with precipices, however, leads to a correction. “Custom soon reconciles us to heights and precipices, and wears off these false and delusive terrors.”²⁶ Reflection on the first influence of general rules leads to a second influence of general rules. Namely, we now possess rules that incorporate our understanding of the imaginative and passionate mechanisms that generate the initial, unreflective fear and the associated high-vivacity idea of danger.

One might think that Hume has ruled out any role for the feeling of fear. The direct passion of fear turns out to have a reasoning component, namely, causal inference. The experience of terror or fear is itself corrected by custom. It is true that the direct passions have a causal reasoning component, but Hume says it goes both ways: “As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions so the passions in their turn are very favourable to belief” (1.3.10.4; T 120).

How can the passions help us form and regulate beliefs, if their deliverances, while regular in the first sense, do not provide us with correct causal beliefs? Hume appreciates the fact that passion and imagination have an important practical role in the way we report belief. We use “concealed strokes of satire” when criticizing others because we know that direct criticism will stir their passions. But utilizing our folk psychology of the passions, which we obtain by reflecting on them, is different from using our own passions in our pursuit of knowledge. The moral of Hume’s example is negative; we are not going to fall, so we can use reflection to discount the fear of falling. It is difficult, however, to accept that the fear of falling has *no* epistemic value. Such fears may motivate us to use caution when on the precipice and refrain from taking that next step; in other cases, they may motivate us to revise our beliefs.

In the precipice case, reflection corrects the fear of falling. The belief that we are safe prevails. But in other fearful circumstances it could go another way. The example of cowardice mentioned above demonstrates this. The coward’s feeling of fear makes him hypersensitive to the belief that he will fall. Such a predisposition is often useful. Imagine that you are at the top of a mountain on skis, looking down at the expert run below. You are confident that you can ski this run without getting hurt. But on this occasion, probability cannot overcome the fear of injury. The anticipation of pain calls your attention to your assessment of the likelihood of a fall, and prods a reassessment. Coward or no coward, your passions play an important role in the assessment of belief. The passions call attention to the salient features of the environment that may prompt a change of belief.²⁷

In the iron cage example, we learn to overcome fear by reflecting on past experience. In the skiing example, we might reflect and discover that fearful feelings and painful spills on the slopes have a certain regularity. In neither case is reason unhinged. Thus, Hume can distinguish those cases in

which we ought to take our fears seriously from those in which we ought to dislodge them, and in doing so, he offers a response to the skepticism first introduced by Montaigne.²⁸

Both Descartes and Hume hold the nonskeptical position that we triumph over the passions on the precipice. But their routes to this conclusion are quite different. Hume's science of the mind places reason, passion, and imagination in a shared arena, where regularities can be investigated and appropriate conclusions drawn. Descartes' view depends on taking the intellect as dominating our passions, but he does not provide a framework in which that position can be elaborated and defended. As surprising as it might be that Hume's conclusion is nonskeptical, perhaps the greater surprise is that Hume's account depends less on the claim that beliefs are sentiments (Hume's purported noncognitivism) than it does on the claim that sentiments have a doxastic component.

NOTES

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1. David Norton has emphasized the relevance of Pascal and Montaigne to the key passage in Hume discussed here, and subsequently documented it in the new critical edition of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 465. All references to the *Treatise* are to the critical edition. The text is cited by book, part, section, and paragraph. T (followed by the page number) refers to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

2. Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 250.

3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), section 44.

4. Montaigne, *Essays*, 250.

5. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume I, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 340.

6. *Ibid.*, 342.

7. Ibid., 343.
8. Ibid., 348.
9. Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 102–3.
10. Ibid., 106.
11. John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 205.
12. Malebranche, *Search*, 106.
13. Cf. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1994).
14. Cf. Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1982), 18 ff.
15. We may be in an iron cage for the first time. Thus, Hume needs to explain how we can make the appropriate causal inferences when there are no past resembling constant conjunctions. See T 103 ff. and my "The Secret Operations of the Mind," *Minds and Machines* 4, no. 3 (August 1994): 303–16.
16. For a good discussion of this question and its connection to general rules, cf. Thomas K. Hearn, Jr., "'General Rules' in Hume's *Treatise*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8 (1970): 405–22.
17. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48.
18. A. T. Nuyen, "The Role of Reason in Hume's Theory of Belief," *Hume Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 372–89.
19. J. A. Passmore, "Hume and the Ethics of Belief," in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 77–92.
20. David Hume, "A Dissertation on the Passions," in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1825), 173.
21. Why reject the belief formed by the imagination? Clearly, we are not going to fall off and die, but were we to fall, we would die. It would seem that there are at least conditional beliefs formed by the imagination, beliefs worthy of our assent. This point, that the imagination and passions appear to generate beliefs, will figure more prominently later.
22. Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 61 ff.
23. Cf. 1.3.10.6; T 121 ff., 13.7.6; T 97–98.
24. 1.3.10.4; T 120. Note that a coward could also be one who is predisposed to believe that he will fall, which then could increase the vivacity of anticipation of pain. But, as Hume emphasizes at 2.3.3.3; T 414, the causal reasoning that leads to the belief cannot, by itself, induce the fear. See also 2.3.6.1; T 424 ff.

25. In correspondence, John Biro has suggested that the passage shows that Hume was concerned about the opposition between demonstrative reasoning and the passions, since the passions seem to hold sway even over things we know demonstratively to be impossible. However, we do not know demonstratively that we won't fall, since the proposition that we will fall is not demonstratively true, given the evidence, but only very likely. The use of "impossible" here must be read as hyperbole.

26. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 217.

27. This aspect of the influence of passions on belief has been suggested in Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

28. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume writes, "Experience being chiefly what forms the associations of ideas, it is impossible that any association could establish and support itself, in direct opposition to that principle" (p. 218). The passions can still have their role. When the thing feared is impossible, experience will correct our initial fear-induced judgments. But where it is probable, our fear cannot and should not be so easily dismissed.