In *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, Robert J. Fogelin sets out to remedy what he regards as some of the defects of his earlier views, developed principally in his well-known book, *Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*. He focuses primarily on his account of both the character of Hume’s skepticism and the relationship between it and Hume’s attempt to develop a science of human understanding. Introducing the central theme of this short monograph, he notes that in his earlier work he “played up” the skeptical themes of Hume’s so-called negative program in order to counter what he then viewed as an overly naturalistic reading of Hume. In *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, Fogelin seeks to balance the equation by giving some well-deserved attention to Hume’s positive program—the development of a “science of man.” The central thesis of the book is that it is precisely this latter element of Hume’s thought, his “unfettered pursuit of the naturalistic” development of a science of human nature through Part 3 of Book I, that pushed Hume into the skeptical crisis that we find him in toward the end in Part 4 of Book I of the *Treatise*. \(^1\)

Thus, according to Fogelin, for better than two-thirds of Book I of the *Treatise* Hume is engaged in the thoroughly unrestrained activity of laying out the principles and significance of his new science of the mind. Having done so, Hume immediately realizes that the results of this naturalistic investigation are not only in tension with some cherished philosophical views but throw us, fully clothed in his naturalistic view of the understanding, into a skeptical morass. Once we understand the principles according to which the understanding operates we are left with no choice but to accept that the understanding is ill-equipped to generate knowledge. What we find in its stead is a mind incapable of justifying its convictions. As Fogelin sees it,

> having presented the skeptical argument, Hume goes on to ask questions of the following kind: “How it happens, that even after all we retain a degree of belief, which is sufficient for our purpose, either in philosophy or in common life” (124/185). It is the pursuit of such questions that leads Hume into a skeptical crisis. (155)

And what is the crux or cause of this skeptical crisis according to Fogelin? It is nothing more, nor less, than the recognition of a conflict between the natural processes governing the formation of belief and the philosopher’s insistence on the need to provide sufficient evidence for these beliefs. If nature did not compel us to form beliefs and reason did not demand their justification, the skeptical crisis would not occur. As Fogelin puts it,

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Hume, when he returns to daily occupations, yields to the current of nature and blindly submits to the deliverances of sense and understanding ... It is the blindness of the submission—accepting something without having, or even seeking, justificatory grounds—that shows most perfectly his skeptical dispositions and principles. (131)

I am not sure what “shows most perfectly” anything but I am confident that Hume’s, or any other individual’s, return to “daily occupations” or yielding “to the current of nature” does not show, perfectly or otherwise, a skeptical disposition. However, what the above passage does help us to see is the broad thesis of this book. In sum, Fogelin’s central claim is that Hume finds himself in a skeptical crisis resulting from a conflict between our natural propensity to form beliefs, on the one hand, and our philosophical inclination to insure that our beliefs are justified on the other.

Throughout *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, Fogelin allows his thesis to unfold through a narrative account instructing us how we ought to read Book I of the *Treatise* (or, at least, how he does). In the opening two chapters, Fogelin takes us on a tour of Part 3 of Book I of the *Treatise*. This is the bit where, according to Fogelin, Hume sees himself as engaged in the significant task of developing his naturalistic science of human understanding. The subsequent five chapters take us successively through Fogelin’s reading of the seven sections comprising Part 4 of Book I of the *Treatise*. This is the bit where, as Fogelin sees it, Hume turns away from his efforts at developing his science of human understanding and instead subjects the results of those earlier efforts to sustained philosophical scrutiny. Fogelin devotes the final chapter of his book to reconciling his reading of the *Treatise* with Hume’s remarks in the first *Enquiry*. The result of this is an extended narrative that attempts to lay out a coherent story of a possible trajectory of Hume’s thought rather than a scholarly and critical analysis of it.

Given what it attempts, the book is marginally successful. However, in his efforts to render his reading of Book I coherent, Fogelin falls short. Given that the primary aim of the book is to render his own view coherent, Fogelin’s tendency to simply dismiss problematic passages as the result of errors or lapses on Hume’s part is itself problematic. Moreover, with those passages Fogelin does select to wrestle into coherence, we are left with the feeling that any failure to subdue them would have stemmed from further errors on Hume’s part (fortunately, Fogelin is able to subdue and bring them in line with his reading). On the whole then, the reader is frequently left wondering whether it is Fogelin or Hume that doesn’t understand what Hume was thinking.

To take a characteristic example, in his discussion of section 3 of Book IV of the *Treatise*, Fogelin begins by drawing the familiar distinction between the philosophical and vulgar perspectives. Whereas the vulgar perspective leads us toward a rather unreflective realism regarding our perceptions, the philosophical view heralds us toward what Fogelin terms the “phenomenalist stance.” According to Fogelin,

the phenomenalist stance is the privileged perspective, the perspective that reveals how things really are when all artificial impositions are suppressed.