

History Will Judge: Hume's General Point of View in Historical Moral Judgment

SERGE GRIGORIEV
Philosophy, Ithaca College

I. JUDGMENT OF HISTORY VERSUS HISTORICALLY INFORMED JUDGMENT

“HISTORY will judge.” What does this mean? Compared to another locution, “Time will tell,” pertaining to the uncertainty regarding the outcome of our present actions, the invocation of history and judgment seems to imply the possibility of a retrospective moral assessment that is superior in principle to our present point of view. What reasons do we have for thinking that such a retrospective judgment may be morally superior? Sometimes historians have access to crucially relevant information inaccessible to contemporaries (for example, the secret memos stored in special archives); but sometimes the contemporaries possess information that historians may not be able to reconstruct. Historians are usually apprised of some consequences of the historical transactions that no contemporary could foresee; but then, it is far from clear what bearing (if any) the consequences of an action practically unforeseeable at the time can rightly have on our assessment of an agent's moral character.¹

More plausibly, the sense of a morally superior perspective can be related to the enabling effects of historical distance, permitting a less partial, less partisan assessment: a balanced assessment from a more general point of view. On this interpretation, historical moral judgment succeeds by enabling us to place past decisions and events in the proper context, thereby allowing us to evaluate them from a more adequate, less prejudiced perspective. But this, in turn, raises questions about what counts as a proper context. It can, for example, be argued that the only appropriate standard for judging the past is that of the past as understood by its contemporaries, and that any attempt at a cross-contextual evaluation results in an illegitimate refusal to deal with the past on its own terms. On the other hand, moral judgments about the past from the perspective of the present will continue to be made, despite philosophical qualms; and it seems reasonable to ask whether they can be made more responsibly, without

¹Following Hume, this is the aspect of moral judgment this article focuses on; this much is presupposed in everything that follows.

simply imposing upon the past the presently favored (potentially flawed) moral perspective.

The acknowledgment of complications, of course, need not entail the suspension of moral judgment; but it does force an additional measure of complexity and caution upon the judgments we make. Consider an example from Hume:

Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister of Great Britain, is a man of ability, not a genius; good-natured, not virtuous; constant, not magnanimous; moderate, not equitable; His virtues, in some instances, are free from the allay of those vices, which usually accompany such virtues: He is a generous friend, without being a bitter enemy. His vices, in other instances, are not compensated by those virtues which are nearly allied to them; His want of enterprise is not attended with frugality. The private character of the man is better than the public: His virtues more than his vices: With many good qualities he has incurred the public hatred: With good capacity he has not escaped ridicule ... His ministry has been more advantageous to his family than to the public, better for this age than for posterity, and more pernicious by bad precedents than by real grievances. (E U, VIII, 575–6)²

It is hard to call Robert Walpole a virtuous man, at least in the traditional sense of civic virtue and responsibility, for he clearly has a tendency to put his own interests before those of the public. At the same time, he makes for a sensible public servant whose moderation and lack of enterprise may be preferable to the excesses of a more shining temper. In the short term, his transgressions and failings may have been relatively minor; although his neglect of principle may have set a dangerous precedent in the long run. Above all, in his personal life, in his narrow circle, he is a much better man than he is a minister in public; and his ministry seems to be often adversely affected by the very same qualities that render him an exemplary father and friend. The assessment proceeds along several different scales, the relationship between which remains essentially problematic. As a man of honor and a man of principle, our subject is clearly deficient. Kantian integrity is obviously not his forte. However, as a prudent man, a man who calculates, he may not be so bad after all (despite his lack of frugality).

The result of a consequentialist assessment will depend in considerable part on whether one focuses on the short-term consequences or the long-term ones; and the assessment of the long-term consequences will itself depend on whether the threat posed by the negative precedents of the Walpole administration proves to be substantial enough. Finally, there is the personal dimension of Walpole's existence, which interacts in a seemingly negative way with his public duties.

Things would be easier if we did not have to juggle these disparate judgments, if some sense of underlying unitary goodness could provide us with a consistent

²Major works by Hume are referenced in the text throughout using the common citation practice referring to standard editions. References to Hume's *Essays* are given as E, followed by Part number (U for Unpublished Essays), Essay number, and page numbers according to David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).

reading across all the relevant scales of moral concern. Systematic philosophers of morality usually promise their readers to deliver some abstract unifying principles of this sort. Hume, however, distrusted speculatively derived abstract principles in both religion³ and moral philosophy (E I, XVIII, 159–60). Positing such principles ran contrary to his view that all general laws pertaining to human life are mere tendencies or generalizations which only manifest themselves when dealing with large numbers or in the long run (E I, XIV, 112). Fixating on principles, in other words, results not infrequently in forgetting that there are “commonly compensations in every human condition,” and these should prompt us to “restrain the prevailing principle” (E II, XI, 404).

Perhaps history could be counted upon to produce the desired reconciliation between the different aspects of moral judgment, with gradual emergence of harmonizing and stabilizing perspectives redeeming its claim to provide (eventually) a superior point of view. Sadly, the actual course of history tends to disappoint such expectations. Even within a single culture, periods of relatively uniform moral consensus are usually succeeded by periods of struggle and social turmoil, bringing the tensions between rival moral priorities into high relief. Worse still, during periods of epochal historical transitions, such as the European transition to modernity, governing assumptions of the social moral discourse have been described by sociologists as being almost entirely “communicatively aflo.”⁴ Thus, somewhere between the 17th and 18th centuries, for example, previously unquestioned (religious) assumptions about the order of the world as a whole, as well as corresponding assumptions about the “natural” (aristocratic) social order, became progressively contested in the emerging public sphere, radically eroding the previously secure foundations of accepted worldviews.

History, on its own, cannot be counted upon to provide us with a general point of view of the proper sort; the most we can hope for is that the moral perspective we eventually take up might be historically informed. Hume’s philosophical suggestions about attaining what he calls the “steady and general points of view,” designed to alleviate the “continual contradictions” that result from differences of perspective, so as to “arrive at a more stable judgment of things” (T 3.3.1.15, SBN, 581–2),⁵ considerably predate his later work as a historian. However, there are clear signs that, even in the early articulation of his view, he already had the problem of historical moral judgment in mind (T 3.3.1.16, SBN, 582). The purpose of the next section of this essay is to examine how Hume’s philosophical sketch of the general point of view measures up to his later judgments as a historian, and what problems it gives rise to in the process. Therefore, it seems

³Jennifer Herdt, “Artificial lives, providential history, and the apparent limits of sympathetic understanding,” Mark Spencer (ed.), *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), pp. 37–59, at p. 42.

⁴Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 25.

⁵References to the *Treatise of Human Nature* (T), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (EHU), and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM) all follow the standard citation format, with page references given according to the Selby-Bigge edition (SBN).

appropriate, in Section II, to adumbrate a more or less conventional interpretation of Hume's conception of the general point of view.

II. HUME'S GENERAL POINT OF VIEW

The problem of the disparity between moral perspectives, noted by Hume, gives rise to two types of conflict: internal and external. On the one hand, to the extent that we are naturally inclined to internalize through sympathy the sentiments of others, being exposed to judgments issuing from conflicting perspectives is liable to produce uncertainty and tension in the mind.⁶ On the other, to the extent that moral judgments affect the way in which people externally live their lives, the instability of moral sentiments may adversely affect their plans and projects of social cooperation.⁷ The general point of view, then, is meant to alleviate these tensions by functioning as a kind of filtering device intended primarily to "correct the output from sympathy,"⁸ to produce a more stable, more impartial moral disposition.

There is some disagreement among commentators about the way in which this filtering function is supposed to be performed. The "ideal observer" readings⁹ typically construe the general point of view "as a cognitive achievement typically requiring a conscious effort of reason and imagination."¹⁰ Rawls's influential *A Theory of Justice* is often cited in this regard, although his discussion of Hume is focused primarily on evaluating social systems rather than individual characters.¹¹ Still, his description of how the general point of view operates can be easily applied to both. "A rational and impartial sympathetic spectator," says Rawls,

is a person who takes up a general perspective: he assumes a position where his own interests are not at stake and he possesses all the requisite information and powers of reasoning. So situated he is equally sympathetic to the desires and satisfactions of everyone affected by the social system.¹²

"Thus," Rawls continues, "he imagines himself in the place of each person in turn ... When he has made the rounds of all the affected parties, so to speak, his approval expresses the total result. Sympathetically imagined pains cancel out sympathetically imagined pleasures."¹³

⁶Christine Korsgaard, "The general point of view: love and moral approval in Hume's ethics," *Hume Studies*, 25 (1999), 3–41, at pp. 24–5.

⁷Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "On why Hume's 'general point of view' isn't ideal—and shouldn't be," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 11 (1994), 202–28, at p. 217.

⁸William Davie, "Hume's general point of view," *Hume Studies*, 24 (1998), 275–94, at p. 281.

⁹See Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Hume on motivating sentiments, the general point of view, and the inculcation of 'morality,'" *Hume Studies*, 20 (1994), 37–58, at p. 37.

¹⁰Davie, "Hume's general point of view," p. 275.

¹¹John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 161.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹³*Ibid.*

Those who are skeptical about the practical feasibility of ordinary people performing such demanding cognitive exercises can point to the fact that Hume apparently (among other things) intended his account to reflect the way in which moral judgments are actually made, famously emphasizing the role of sentiment over reason (T 3.3.1.15, SBN, 581), lessening the plausibility of the “ideal observer” interpretation’s extraordinary cognitive demands. The alternative, “sentimentalist” readings¹⁴ gravitate more towards the model of an unconscious or semi-conscious perceptual correction,¹⁵ drawing on the aesthetic analogy suggested by Hume himself: “the judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses” (EPM 5.41, SBN, 227).

Setting the debate about the *modus operandi* aside, for the time being, it is noteworthy that there seems to be, at present, little disagreement about the nature of the perspectival shift intended to be accomplished by the refocusing of sympathy while assuming the general point of view. In Korsgaard’s succinct formulation, taking up the general point of view “consists of sympathizing with the person’s narrow circle and judging according to general rules.”¹⁶ Interpreted in terms of positioning oneself at an appropriate distance from the subject of one’s moral judgment, this combination of prescriptions makes sense: identifying imaginatively with the person’s narrow circle reduces the emotional distance due to the passage of time and difference of circumstances, while focusing on the general tendency of the moral character in the long run counters the inevitably myopic narrowness of the proximal point of view.

A historical point of view, however, gives rise to additional difficulties. One is a potential conflict between the character’s typical effects on the narrow circle (say, close associates of a charismatic dictator) and the general (say, destructive) tendency of such a character considered in the long run. Secondly, there is a problem of interpreting the meaning of the “narrow circle.” Hume’s recommendation to consider the influence of characters “upon those who have intercourse with any person” is explicitly made with a view to overlooking “our own interest in those general judgments” (T 3.3.1.17, SBN, 582): an objective that can be successfully accomplished in a number of different ways without specifying who, in fact, counts as being affected or influenced by a person’s character. Naturally, there is an important difference between considering the influence of a personal character on just *some* persons affected by it and considering the influence of a character on *all* persons who are thought to be significantly affected. In the case of a statesman, for example, Hume recommends that we regard *all* his fellow-citizens as “the objects, which lie nearest the eye, while we determine his character”;

¹⁴Radcliffe, “Hume on motivating sentiments,” p. 37.

¹⁵See, for example, Davie, “Hume’s general point of view,” or Kathleen Wallace, “Hume on regulating belief and moral sentiment,” *Hume Studies*, 28 (2002), 83–111.

¹⁶Korsgaard, “The general point of view,” p. 23.

although he cautions, simultaneously, against extending such consideration to groups of concern that are not “duly limited,” such as the whole of humankind (EPM 5.38, SBN, 225n).

Finally, there is a difficulty pertaining to the notion of the “usual results”¹⁷ of a character’s operation. Historical discontinuities, the sometimes radical transformations that drastically alter the ordinary conditions of living and social operation, render the notion of the “usual results” considered in the historical long run distinctly problematic. Character qualities superbly suited to the age of tribal warfare may well be counterproductive in the age of commercial bureaucratization, and vice versa, suggesting the need to index the idea of “usual results” to concrete historical circumstances. All of these problems will be addressed more fully in the following section, in the light of Hume’s later work as a historian and with a view to the challenges they may pose to his earlier account of the general point of view.

III. CHARACTER ASSESSMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Despite the didactic ambitions of many historical writers, history truthfully narrated does not teach many consistent lessons in moral character. Unlike his contemporaries, most of whom forthrightly regarded history as a practical “pedagogy of public life,”¹⁸ Hume, qua historian, can be plausibly credited with realizing that personal virtue “has limited relevance” to historians’ explanations.¹⁹ The most notable characters in his *History of England* frustrate simple-minded attempts at a non-equivocal moral evaluation. Take Cromwell, of whom Hume says that “no human mind ever contained so strange a mixture of sagacity and absurdity” (HE VI, 80),²⁰ or Mary Stuart, the enumeration of whose qualities “might carry the appearance of a panegyric,” while instances of her conduct must “wear the aspect of severe satire and invective” (HE IV, 252). Combined in the person of the illustrious Elizabeth were “malignity” (HE IV, 50), duplicity (HE IV, 70), conceit with respect to beauty (HE IV, 383), but also “magnanimous courage,” “consummate wisdom” (HE IV, 216), as well as “her vigor, her constancy, her magnanimity, her penetration, vigilance, address” (HE IV, 351).

Henry III’s inability to subdue his “turbulent barons” is explained by his being “gentle, humane, and merciful” (HE II, 15), while Charles I acquired his reputation as a duplicitous tyrant in large degree because of the sincerity of his religious sentiments: a character trait “which in that religious age, should have been of infinite advantage to him” (HE V, 213). Conversely, the very worst qualities of

¹⁷Carole Stewart, “The moral point of view,” *Philosophy*, 51 (1976), 177–87, at p. 183. Cf. Korsgaard, “The general point of view,” p. 3; Radcliffe, “Hume on motivating sentiments,” p. 42; Sayre-McCord, “On why Hume’s ‘general point of view’ isn’t ideal,” p. 212; and others.

¹⁸Mark Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 75.

¹⁹Mark Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 69.

²⁰References to Hume’s *History of England* are given as HE, followed by volume and page number in David Hume, *The History of England*, ed. William Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983).

Henry VIII were the guarantor of both his success and the security of his subjects for, “driven by his ungoverned humor, he casually steered a course which led more certainly to arbitrary power, than any which the most profound politics could have traced out to him” (HE III, 214). The king’s natural capriciousness coupled with violence turned out to be a gift in a factious polity, since “the uncertainty of the king’s humor gave each party an opportunity of triumphing in its turn” (HE III, 270). Hume, here, stands ready to acknowledge the genuine complexity of historical characters, while also suggesting that a significant difference may obtain between what a character *is*, morally speaking, and what it *does*—or the effects it produces under concrete historical circumstances.

Character complexity on its own need not, of course, pose any serious philosophical problems. It may, perhaps, raise some doubts about whether the notion of character is “robust” enough²¹ to support a determinate moral judgment. For example, it is true that patterns of consistency in a human personality are normally counterbalanced by a certain degree of plasticity; furthermore, the same personality may exhibit inconsistent or even contrary tendencies, rendering holistic character judgments problematic. Yet, insofar as Hume merely advises us to focus on an enduring disposition, rather than an individual action (T 3.2.1.2, 3.3.1.4, SBN, 477, 575), and on those dispositions only that disclose the underlying principles of the acting mind (EHU 8.29, SBN, 98; T 2.3.2.7, SBN, 411–12), it appears entirely plausible to restrict historical moral judgment to constitutive character traits instead of character as a whole, to suspend judgment in especially confusing and ill-documented cases, to indicate the degree of uncertainty in the judgment itself, or to confine one’s conclusions to a limited number of representative character *types*, disregarding the complications arising from particular variations. A historian cannot be expected to render a determinate moral judgment in every case, regardless of the compounding circumstances and available evidence. Hence, any of the possibilities enumerated above, and others besides, may be legitimately employed to address the challenges posed by psychological complexity.

The second contention, regarding the practical efficacy of a character, is more controversial, especially if one is committed to evaluating the goodness of character in consequentialist terms. The value of a character, apparently, cannot be simply equated with the specific results it produces. Several safeguards are built into Hume’s philosophical theory to emphasize this point. In judging the moral merit of a character, we are advised to think about the *characteristic* effects of the pertinent traits in the *long run*, rather than on a particular occasion. Taking the long view of character propensities, in other words, not only requires us to take into account their less immediate consequences, but draws attention also,

²¹Nancy Schaubert, “Complexities of character: Hume on love and responsibility,” *Hume Studies*, 35 (2009), 29–55, at p. 31.

perhaps more importantly, to their *typical* effects: that is, their effects under something like “standard” or ordinary conditions.²²

As Hume explains in a letter to Hutcheson, we must attend to the “tendency of qualities” and not “their actual Operation, which depends on chance” (L 1, 35).²³ Consequently, the recognition of virtue need not rely in each case on its successful outward expression: virtue remains a virtue even in “a dungeon or desert” where it “can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world” (T 3.3.1.19, SBN, 584). In fact, it remains a virtue even in cases where, due to the force of circumstances, its practical effects turn out to be unambiguously harmful. Thus, love of liberty remains a virtue even though, in the case of Brutus, it led to the regrettable subversion of the Roman republic (L 1, 35).

The logic behind such judgments is reasonably transparent: for example, a person deserves to be recognized for their generosity despite the fact that a condition of extreme poverty prevents their generosity from bearing any tangible fruit. To properly appreciate the point, one only needs to imagine a simple counterfactual condition, the antecedents of which are taken to be fulfilled commonly enough. Furthermore, generosity remains a laudable moral characteristic, despite the fact that its exertions occasionally may be abused by its recipients. Here, the reasoning presupposes a standard statistical distribution wherein extreme departures from the ordinary state of affairs are regarded as being rare enough to warrant omission. In both cases, the approval of generosity presupposes the existence of certain “normal” recurrent conditions under which generosity is capable of manifesting its usual beneficial effects. It would, of course, be much harder to argue for the virtues of generosity in a world where endemic poverty were a universal irremediable condition, or a world in which beneficiaries of generosity invariably felt compelled to put the advantages thereby gained to destructive uses.

Applying this reasoning to historical characters, however, gives rise to two potentially embarrassing problems. First, by examining the historical record thus far, one is liable to discover a somewhat troubling disparity between the kinds of qualities that are ordinarily considered “good” and the kinds of qualities that tend to promote the successful resolution of historical affairs. Unqualified kindness, for instance, may turn out to be a kind of weakness; whereas unflinching duplicity may turn out to be a considerable asset in conducting diplomacy. Secondly, since the tendencies of the moral traits are assessed with reference to the normal recurring conditions, different kinds of goodness would be suited to different periods of human history. For example, what counts as “normal conditions” for rich contemporary democracies has been more or less unimaginable throughout most of history. This would plausibly indicate that some character traits which

²²Elizabeth Ashford, “Utilitarianism with a Humean face,” *Hume Studies*, 31 (2005), 63–92, at p. 66.

²³References to Hume’s letters (L) follow the (volume, page) format in David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).

have previously been regarded as beneficial may have lost their moral value in the transition to modernity; while some others, which have been of little or no use in the ages past, may from now on progressively lie at the center of our moral concern. So, just as politeness was probably of little value to a caveman, martial valor may not be a virtue we want to cultivate in a salesperson.

The first problem cannot simply be resolved either by imagining counterfactual conditions, as in the earlier example of impoverished generosity, or by dismissing the problem by declaring that the apparent vices turned out to be artificial virtues (similar to justice in this regard) whose true value could only be discerned retrospectively by considering the beneficial effects in the long run. The legitimacy of imagining the counterfactual conditions is premised on the notion that in many cases the conditions of the specified sort are actually likely to obtain. However, if the historical record shows that duplicity in a public figure (say, a diplomat) consistently proves useful, while a compassionate sentimental disposition in a ruler proves invariably disadvantageous, we cannot simply resort to imagining scenarios which never or rarely obtain in order to overturn these well-supported verdicts. Nor will it do to declare duplicity a virtue or compassion a sin, when so many people can use their ordinary personal experiences to argue that the exact opposite must be true.

Instead, we can begin by concurring with Craig Walton that the lack of a necessary correspondence between private moral character and public merit constitutes one of Hume's most important findings as a working historian.²⁴ Queen Elizabeth, for example, had she been born into a private station, "would not have been very amiable" (HE IV, 397), and yet she proved to be a magnificent ruler. The Stuart monarchs, on the contrary, possessing many virtues suited to the conduct of a private life, generally lacked qualities advisable in their capacity as sovereigns (HE V, 121–2; VI, 447). Our moral sensibilities concerning private persons do not appear to match the lessons taught by history regarding the desirability of certain characteristics in figures of public import. Nor is there any good *prima facie* reason why the two should match. We would not want a statesman playing father to his subjects; nor would we want a father playing emperor to his wife and children.

Relationship to individual concrete persons lies at the foundation of our ordinary sense of private morality. Meanwhile, a position of public authority, a historical role, forces one to act in view of the interests of countless anonymous "others." A personal relationship or an extra touch of sentiment, in this case, is liable to function as an obstruction, as when personal sympathy interferes with the outcome of procedural justice. Here, the notion of appealing to the effects of the character upon a "narrow circle" appears dramatically misplaced. A difficult,

²⁴Craig Walton, "Hume's England as a natural history of morals," Nicholas Capaldi and Donald Livingston (eds), *Liberty in Hume's History of England* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), pp. 25–52, at pp. 38, 43. See also Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 69.

cold, calculating person could turn out to be a fair ruler (despite being an inattentive husband), and a ruthless dictator could prove to be genuinely compassionate, sensitive, and jovial among family and friends. Broadening the sphere of concern, however, introduces another problem, already noted by Rawls: namely, that in many situations, the variously affected parties “must have some separate interests which may conflict.”²⁵ “Benevolence,” says Rawls, “is at sea as long as its many loves are in opposition in the persons of its many objects.”²⁶ In history, this is especially true when there is no love to be lost between the affected parties. What pleases the slave-owners is not likely to gain the approval of the slaves; what curries favor with the court is liable to produce resentment in the country. Should we be prepared to applaud the ruler whose eccentric character brings delight to the bigoted majority, even as it instills paralyzing fear into the members of some small, marginalized group of citizens?

The odd feature of Hume’s account of the general point of view that emerges in this connection consists in its surprising *neutrality* with respect to the question of the moral status of the affected. Would our judgment of a person’s inspirational character remain unaltered once we learn that the “narrow circle” he used to inspire consisted of the fellow members of an extermination squad? Why not explicitly acknowledge the emotional optics that operate in actual historical judgments, wherein the evaluation of an agent’s moral character is not infrequently conditioned by the moral judgment about those who are affected by it and the perceived legitimacy of their moral claims? Unjustified partiality may be one problem standing in the way: such as, for example, the tendency to excuse atrocities as long as they are perpetuated by those “on our side” against those who are not. However, correcting such biases is a practical task for a conscientious historian. We do not eliminate the bias by simply eliding the question of the legitimacy of the respective moral claims of the contending parties.

Assessing the moral worth of those affected by the person’s character can complicate moral judgments, yet it also solves a number of problems. Duplicity, for instance, may not be such an objectionable feature when practiced on those who themselves excel in the art of deception; whereas compassion expended on (say) political opportunists can be indeed perceived as an unworthy trait. This corresponds to the drift of our ordinary moral judgments. Moreover, in the case of common private persons, the second layer of judgment can be conveniently abbreviated by the assumption of neutrality towards the members of the agent’s narrow circle: their very ordinariness simultaneously inviting and warranting such an assumption.

It is worth remembering that Hume’s introduction of the idea of the narrow circle was prefaced by a reflection on the fact that most people’s virtuous sentiments are very limited, seldom extending beyond their friends and family or, at best, their country. “Being thus acquainted with the nature of man, we expect

²⁵Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 165.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 166.

not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that narrow circle” (T 3.3.3.2, SBN, 602). This holds true for many, perhaps most, people; but not everybody’s circumstances are the same and, in the end, the degree of good we should expect from a person should be “in proportion to the station which a man possesses, according to the relations in which he is placed” (EPM 5.38, SBN, 225n). Those who are placed by history in exceptional circumstances, deserve a different treatment and, accordingly, it is possible to argue that the simplifying assumption of the moral neutrality of the “narrow circle” may no longer hold, introducing a need for a more complicated bifocal judgment structure.²⁷

IV. DIFFERENCES IN MORAL STANDING OF HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Returning to the second problem mentioned at the outset, given that the moral convictions of a culture change over time, as does its sense of what counts as normal or ordinary conditions, how can we judge the virtue of an agent who inhabits historical circumstances radically different from our own? According to Hume, the dynamic of interaction between a personality and its historical circumstances can be quite complex. In some cases, the individual is quite powerless to turn the tide of events or to reform the present climate of opinion. Even the wisest prince, Hume remarks, could not muster the resources to introduce toleration in ages ruled by ignorance and religious prejudice (HE IV, 54).²⁸

However, Hume also ascribes to individual character the power to influence a situation, to transform it, to create a situation out of nothing, or to reduce to nothingness a situation which formed itself before the character’s arrival. As he puts it, “The movements of great states are often directed by as slender springs as those of individuals” (HE VI, 46). Thus, the personal example of a monarch is cited by Hume on several occasions as the decisive factor influencing the cultural climate of the age: promoting learning in the case of Alfred (HE I, 80), or banishing the “sour and malignant humors” of religious enthusiasm in the case of Charles II (HE VI, 157). Elizabeth’s prudence is presented as the key factor binding the nation in its unexpectedly successful resistance to Spanish invasion (HE IV, 264), while the dissipated personality of her successor, James I, is solely to blame for the consequent rapid decline of England’s international prestige, seemingly unassailable at the time of his ascension (HE V, 24).

The one consistent lesson that can be drawn from Hume’s observations regarding the role of character in history is that, in order to be appropriately effective, the character generally has to *match* the social and moral climate of her time. A gentle ruler in a barbaric age is liable to fail as a ruler and may instead

²⁷Cf. Sayre-McCord, “On why Hume’s ‘general point of view’ isn’t ideal,” p. 219.

²⁸Although, in the end, toleration was brought about, according to Hume, through the activities of religious zealots (independents) driven by the spirit of enthusiasm, highlighting (once again) history’s penchant for irony and paradox. See G. Conti, “Hume’s low road to toleration,” *History of Political Thought*, 36 (2015), 165–91.

end up becoming a martyr. Meanwhile, a volatile sovereign like Henry VIII could accomplish much, while simultaneously securing the affection of his subjects, “notwithstanding his cruelty, his extortion, his violence, his arbitrary administration” (HE III, 322), simply because his disposition was suited to the age in which he lived (HE III, 323).²⁹ In other words, there usually is a certain premium on having the maxims of one’s reign be “conformable to the principles of the times” (HE IV, 145). Accordingly, if consequentialist intuitions are to be given their proper weight, we cannot reasonably want a historical character to have so far surpassed the moral dispositions of her age as to become an alien within it. But that, of course, leaves us in something of a lurch: among a people whose highest aspiration was to drink ale from the skull of their enemies (HE I, 27), cruelty may have counted as virtue, and cruel men enjoyed success and recognition. Are we then to applaud or excuse cruelty on the account of “historical circumstances”?

Quite literally, this is a matter of perspective. A person’s actions (as opposed to mere animal behavior) acquire an important part of their moral meaning by virtue of the intentions that inform them, viewed in the light of how these intentions are normally interpreted and described by some appropriately qualified others. Hence, in describing the past, we are inadvertently engaged in equilibrating between the concepts that historical agents used to describe themselves and the later concepts which *we* cannot help using in describing their actions. There is, of course, no general recipe as to how to perform this balancing act correctly in each instance.

On the one hand, we may try to see things from the agent’s own perspective or from the perspective of his or her contemporaries. Since the terms in which historical agents formulate their intentions are not our terms, if intention is to play a major role in character assessment, it makes sense to privilege the perspective of the agent. What an agent’s decision discloses about her character, on this argument, must depend on the actual way in which the agent construes her situation, never mind how odd the resulting assessment may seem by our lights. Similarly, the perspective of the agent’s contemporaries deserves to be privileged to the extent that it offers us valuable clues about the constituent elements of the agent’s own perspective: it is not unusual, of course, for agents to simply share the perspective of their contemporaries or at least to take it into consideration when deciding on the appropriateness of particular behaviors and attitudes. In other words, people tend to act with at least a partial view to the anticipated judgment of the pertinent others.

²⁹Overall, it must be noted that in his discussion of moral motivation, Hume specifically resists substituting the consideration of possible effects for evaluation of the underlying motivating passion. So, while causal probabilistic reasoning may affect our decisions, it does not generate them on its own, but operates merely by modulating the passions (T 2.3.3.3, SBN, 414); nor do the errors of such reasoning translate into the determination of action with respect to virtue and vice (T 3.1.1.12, SBN, 459–60).

On the other hand, Hume's account of English history gives us very little reason to believe that *every* historically extant moral perspective can be reasonably thought to possess a significant moral value. Many beliefs fundamental to the moral outlook of successive generations can be shown to have originated and found continuing support in overzealous imagination, superstition, self-serving prejudice, partisan conceit, or outright bigotry. There is probably no need, for example, to excuse or explain away cruelty when it stems from the shared social fantasies of mastery and domination.

The two-tiered model of judgment proposed earlier for dealing with the problem of the disparity between private virtue and the demands of a public station can once again be of use, especially because it accords rather well with Hume's own manner of passing historical moral judgment. Thus, Hume is generally inclined to show leniency towards the culprits who act in accordance with the prevailing customs of their age, preferring to regard their behavior as unfortunate rather than criminal. The burden of moral condemnation in cases of this sort is shifted to the culture and the epoch, rather than the individual.

There is a pertinent sense wherein the judgment about the moral development of a society as a whole can rightly take precedence over sorting out individual merits and transgressions. A society tends to create a certain moral climate, an atmosphere of tolerance or intolerance towards certain attitudes or behaviors influencing our day-to-day sense of moral well-being, sometimes more so than the outstanding individual acts. Society, in other words, is largely responsible for what counts as the normal moral expectations in a given place and time. Simultaneously, individual conduct will, more often than not, depart from the aforementioned norm in countless ways. At any rate, the very idea of a social moral norm must be at best a crude generalization: most societies are animated by a number of competing moral currents, differently interpreted, and variably adhered to by their individual members.

A culture ordinarily puts a range of moral options at one's disposal; moreover, individuals are normally capable of forming their own reflexive moral judgments, which may either inflect their interpretation of the prevailing norms or, in some cases, lead them to adopt ideas altogether at variance with the previously available options. Hence, beyond the question of the general moral standing of a society at a given time in its history, we are also faced with the question about the moral development level of a particular individual, relative to their home society. A person may be fit for a better age or, conversely, be an embarrassment to his own.

A historical moral judgment, then, would require giving coordinated answers to *three* interdependent questions: (a) What would the individual's cultural coevals make of his moral character? (b) What kind of moral standing can be assigned to the individual's home society? (c) To what degree did this individual's reflective moral development allow him to transcend the governing moral standards of his group or his age? For example, Attila the Hun may have been an exemplary character as far as Huns go, sufficiently endowed with all the cardinal Hunnic

virtues; but Huns were overall a barbarous and cruel people; and, to the best of our knowledge, Attila's level of moral development did not permit him to move far beyond the commonly shared moral precepts of his tribe.

V. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND PRESENT SENSIBILITY

Setting aside the questions of accuracy and justification, how do people ordinarily pass judgment on the moral worth of an age that is not their own? More broadly, how do they assess the moral status of others who inhabit a significantly different form of life? It is actually plausible to think of such judgments on the model of a perceptual correction associated with the sentimentalist interpretation of the general point of view. With some cautionary qualifications, the remoteness of an age is instinctively interpreted in terms of a sympathetic distance. Some historical cultural groups seem to be "just like us" and others much less like "us"; but it is only when the historical cultural practices under consideration begin to verge on the alien that the need for an explicit historical *reconstruction* starts to appear imperative.

Professional historians and social scientists probably would insist that such an informal, "sympathetic" mode of proceeding is liable to mislead us on many occasions. Explicit historical reconstruction is almost always desirable, because even ages and cultures that appear a lot "like ours" upon superficial examination may turn out to harbor significant structural differences that would render a moral judgment borrowed from our own form of life potentially inappropriate. Acknowledging a need for such deliberate, cognitively responsible, demanding corrections pushes us, then, in the direction of the cognitive (ideal observer) interpretation of the general point of view. Yet, even this precaution is powerless to eliminate the presentist bias and potentially unwelcome partiality. People will still be inclined to sympathize with the more familiar and resist or dismiss the alien, and their judgments about whether a particular character has managed to transcend the moral limitations of her age will, in all likelihood, be based on whether this character feels somehow "closer to us" than the contemporaries by whom she was surrounded.

The problem is that "being more like us" need not translate into being morally better or having more appropriate categories of moral judgment. Cultural parochialism that asserts the contrary is by now commonly regarded as a sign of bigoted, untutored provinciality. Historical parochialism, on the other hand, is flourishing, enabled by the entrenched popular belief that human history, above all, has been a history of progress, technological, political, and moral. From this already dubious premise, a further, even more specious, conclusion is drawn: namely, that while we may not have attained the optimal moral and political state just yet, we do nevertheless already have a clear understanding of what counts as genuine progress towards such a state, putting us in an excellent position to pass a definitive judgment on earlier times. In other words, while our practice may

fall short of our moral vision, our moral vision itself is at present substantially complete.

The claim that our present values (for example, our understanding of freedom) constitute the true telos of history is so common that it is often taken for granted. Hume's principled resistance to this form of argument, which sets him apart, especially from the thinkers of his own age, may be attributed to the realization³⁰ that teleological explanations of this sort simply end up bringing back providential history in a new guise. Hume, for his part, strictly opposed providential history in all its forms,³¹ and was, by extension, decidedly suspicious of any theories of "continuous historical progress, or indeed any other speculative theory of history."³² For Hume, civilization was an essentially precarious thing.³³ The evident progress of modern society was a historical contingency, which could not be deduced in advance "from human psychology or the laws of economics or the dialectic of history."³⁴ Substantial progress, no doubt, had been made from antiquity to the modern era, but this progress has been neither continuous, nor inevitable.³⁵

Stressing this key point is fundamental for an appropriately calibrated reception of the argument advanced in the rest of this essay. Hume's uncompromisingly negative attitude towards the conceptions of providence, historical teleology, any form of intrinsic rationality embedded in the historical process, sets his (empiricist) approach to history apart from much of the fashionable historical theorizing by both his contemporaries and philosophical successors. Providential history, consigning the actual course of history to divine guidance, had been unequivocally championed by leading intellectual authorities of his time, including David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and Isaac Newton.³⁶ On such a view of history, where right makes might, the values that emerge triumphant in the course of history must ipso facto be the appropriate ones, for providence must be understood to (ultimately) favor the righteous. Hume's take on providentially ordained history is well known: the course of the historical events,

³⁰Argued explicitly, much later, by Karl Löwith, in *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

³¹R. Popkin, "Hume: philosophical versus prophetic historian," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (1976), 83–95, at p. 83; S. Foster, "David Hume and Edward Gibbon: philosophical historians/historical philosophers: introduction and overview," *Modern Schoolman*, 84 (2007), 285–95, at p. 286; Claudia Schmidt, *David Hume: Reason in History* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 40.

³²Schmidt, *David Hume*, p. 407.

³³Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 309.

³⁴Nicholas Capaldi, "The preservation of liberty," Capaldi and Livingston, *Liberty in Hume's History of England*, pp. 195–224, at p. 195.

³⁵Claudia Schmidt, "David Hume as a philosopher of history," Spencer, *David Hume: Historical Thinker*, pp. 63–179, at p. 168; and Christopher Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), p. 103. In fact, Hume maintains that all historical progress inevitably checks itself (L 1, 143, Nov. 1750).

³⁶Donald Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 286.

he observes, “is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions.”³⁷ Hume’s historical sensibilities, in this regard, were profoundly modern: he did not think that any kind of future was predestined or especially ordained; the future, on his view, was made by finite human beings in secular historical time.

Moreover, in contradistinction to Kant, Hume felt no need to fill the conceptual space vacated by the receding specter of providence by some kind of benign teleological tendency discernible within the course of the historical process itself. Kant felt, of course, that history desperately needed rescuing, made up as it was “of folly and childish vanity, and often of childish malice and destructiveness”,³⁸ unable to support any high opinion that we might want to form of our species,³⁹ serving instead as “a constant reproach to anything else”.⁴⁰ Hence, Kant thought that it was imperative to find in history some general progressive trend conducive to increasing our “rational self-esteem” in preference to “mere well-being”;⁴¹ whereas, from a Humean perspective, such well-intentioned attempts at philosophical redemption of history were simply unwarranted by ordinary historical considerations.

Hume, for example, had no trouble embracing a historical possibility which Kant found to be rationally abhorrent: namely, that a state of new barbarism may overwhelm our civilized condition and all the cultural progress hitherto achieved.⁴² For Kant, such a development would have precipitated the ominous conclusion that “the order of nature is *purposive* in its parts but *purposeless* as a whole”.⁴³ For Hume, it represented a perfectly ordinary course of events, for “the crust of civilization was always thin ... and never to be taken for granted,”⁴⁴ with the reversal to the patterns of behavior characteristic of an earlier stage of civilization always remaining a possibility.⁴⁵ For him, history was plausibly seen as an “unintended result of man’s attempt to satisfy human needs,”⁴⁶ with many of the more important accomplishments emerging as the remedies for the shortcomings of human nature (E I, XIV, 132), not as the expressions of its better potentialities. Hume had always been an admirer of concrete progress; yet, he

³⁷David Hume, *Natural History of Religion* (London: Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889), p. 8.

³⁸Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose” (1784), *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 42.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 53.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 43.

⁴²Ibid., p. 48.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Nicholas Phillipson, *David Hume: The Philosopher as Historian* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 16.

⁴⁵Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature*, p. 184. Hume overall seemed to think that history consists of a series of local cyclical developments, with civilizations going through the necessary cycles of rise and decline; see HE II, 519; and letter to Lord Kames, 4 Mar. 1758 (L 1, 271).

⁴⁶Donald Livingston, “Hume’s historical conception of liberty,” Capaldi and Livingston, *Liberty in Hume’s History of England*, pp. 105–53, at p. 123.

saw no good cause to conflate the intermittent reasonableness or intelligibility of human affairs with the assurance that continuous progress must take place. In short, he “did not equate the natural course of things, by which human beings flourish, with the inevitable or even likely course of things.”⁴⁷

If we cannot take historical progress for granted, nor can we, as a consequence, be assured on historical grounds of the inherent superiority of our contemporary point of view, what standard, then, remains for passing moral judgment on the practices and assumptions of an earlier age? Here, again, we have to find the right balance between striving for objectivity and acknowledging our own inescapable historical situatedness. Avoiding parochialism may be a virtue, but so is resisting the illusion that we can (or should) entirely abandon the enabling conceptions and moral practices of our own time and place. Is there a convincing way of remaining anchored in our familiar moral universe while simultaneously aspiring to transcend its particular limitations in the name of a greater impartiality, of a general point of view?

The situation is actually not nearly as bad as one might think. The dangers of parochialism stem from the inability to seriously consider the claims of alternative moral perspectives, the inability to triangulate, in good faith, between different points of view, leaving the agent trapped within his or her own dogmatic mindset. Cases of such dogmatism abound, yet it is not unavoidable. Most cultures are heterogeneous and complex, and this complexity provides a potential antidote to dogmatism, since members of many cultures are usually aware of a number of somewhat incompatible moral intuitions or perspectives competing for their loyalties at the same time.

Such fragmented moral allegiances cannot insure us against serious omissions and mistakes, yet they do prevent us from being entirely blinded by the “clarity” of our own moral vision. For example, the consequentialist’s interest in the pursuit of happiness is checked by the deontologist’s refusal to obtain happiness at the price of dignity; the deontologist’s admiration of moral principles is, in turn, restrained by a consequentialist’s opposition to cruelty. In this sense, we are frequently and unproblematically aware of how the values we hold look from a different value perspective, which we also hold simultaneously, since the two coexist in our society. The plurality of moral standpoints is no panacea but, since we have no real alternative to trusting *at least some* of our current moral intuitions, it is encouraging to know that their usual composition resembles more a system of checks and balances than an intransigent, uncompromisingly monolithic creed.

It is natural, perhaps, to hope that our major conflicting moral values may eventually be reconciled. Philosophers are usually hoping for some kind of theoretical synthesis, but an ordinary person is more likely to hope for a

⁴⁷John Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason: Recovering the Human Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 135.

reconciliation in practice: through historically emergent social and institutional arrangements that would contribute to defusing the present conflicts by making it easier to secure satisfactory compromises. Imagining a state in which our currently conflicting moral intuitions may converge can be condemned as escapism—or taken seriously as an attempt to literally *feel* our way towards a place where our sympathies deserve to lie, as a pragmatic bid or an aspiration, the desirability of which can be convincingly explained in our current moral vocabulary. Hope, after all, according to Hume, is a sentiment that attaches to states of probability and uncertainty (T 3.3.1.2, SBN, 574).

VI. HUME'S RECONSTRUCTIVE ACCOUNT

Hope can be irresponsible, utopian, not of this world, breeding contempt for the present and the future, breeding distrust towards any realistically attainable state of social coexistence. Such idealistic renunciation of the real, the practical, the material shares much in common with the ascetic, otherworldly impulse at the heart of religious morality, which Hume objected to so vigorously in his time.⁴⁸ Responsible hope, on the other hand, must be historically situated: it needs to grow out of the possibilities that can already be discerned, however tentatively, in the concrete experience of our cultural present and its past. Hume, in fact, provides us with an excellent example of how a vision of a realistic, historically informed hope can be constructed, bringing together, theoretically, the disparate currents of moral intuitions characteristic of one's own contemporary cultural milieu.

Hume's age, according to political historians, witnessed a clash between two different historical orders of social functioning: "an ancient and a modern, a classical and a commercial."⁴⁹ The "ancient" (or aristocratic) moral order regarded with contempt the new commercial classes' exclusive concern with material prosperity; it championed a strict adherence to principles, to a moral code, as a way of perpetuating one's claim to legitimacy and spiritual superiority. It scorned the utilitarian, calculating spirit characteristic of the later consequentialism. The latter was the province of the new commercial man, far less interested in legitimation than in efficiency and capacity for action, less occupied with the traditional topoi of independence and self-government than with the earthly prospect of material prosperity as well as the gambles implicated in pursuit thereof. Thus, Hume's contemporaries were faced with the problem of reconciling the traditional interest in principles underlying the distinctions of social rank and administration of justice with the utilitarian ethos, oriented towards consequences measured in practical, material terms.

⁴⁸Donald Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), p. 134.

⁴⁹J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 122.

Simultaneously, the literary culture of the age showed a growing interest in what we would now call “cultural history”: in historical development of commerce, industry, and the arts,⁵⁰ and especially in the comparative study of “manners,” that is, customs and mores of different social formations at different times.⁵¹ This conception of “manners,” in turn, supplied a historical basis for a new understanding of virtue,⁵² closely tied to the notions of cultural and social progress, and deliberately opposed both to the antiquated virtue of the aristocrats and to religious enthusiasm.⁵³ At the core of this novel (and secularized) conception of (civic) virtue was a steadfast commitment to the indispensable pragmatic role of the civilizing social institutions (such as the administration of justice) and to the maintenance of an appropriate general level of public morality.⁵⁴ The concern with specifically personal virtue found an outlet in the fashionable literary sentimentalism of the age, focused on the existential peripeteias of a concretely situated human soul,⁵⁵ and meant primarily to contribute to the development of “moral imagination”⁵⁶ and, consequently, to the deepening of sympathy for other human beings. Configuring the relationship between this newly fashionable cosmopolitan morality and the two other moral preoccupations mentioned above would pose an additional challenge for a comprehensive moral theory.

Hume notably resolves the conflict between justice and utility in his account of justice as an artificial virtue. Effectively, he describes justice as a historical institution developing gradually over time, as a collectively manufactured way of outmaneuvering the weakness of individual human nature.⁵⁷ Justice, once introduced, tends to prove itself useful, and as people become convinced of the utility of justice in the long run, their reasoned regard for it continues to grow (EPM 3.21, SBN, 192) until (finally) the habit of positive association affixes to it a sentiment of approval that appears almost entirely natural (EPM 3.47, SBN, 203). Nevertheless, Hume insists, the “sole foundation” of artificial virtues like justice lies in the reflection on their beneficial (utilitarian) consequences (EPM 3.1, SBN, 183).

The strategy employed is an interesting one. The idea of justice does not have any intrinsic conceptual connection to the notion of utility; the relationship between the two is contingent, empirical, historical: justice has proven itself repeatedly useful in the past; this is why people have become interested in the expansion of justice; and the expansion of justice, in turn, tended to further

⁵⁰Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, p. 65.

⁵¹Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 148.

⁵²Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, p. 48.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 48; and Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 172.

⁵⁵Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 123.

⁵⁶Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, p. 95.

⁵⁷Rachel Cohon, “A very brief summary of Hume’s morality: feeling and fabrication,” *Hume Studies*, 34 (2008), 253–6, at p. 256.

increase utility. The postulated relationship, then, is a matter of an inductive historical projection, a probabilistic assessment claiming that, because historical experience thus far tended to (eventually) convince people of the intrinsic value of justice (by virtue of its instrumental utility), it will continue to do so in the future. Continuing growth of justice, then, is, properly speaking, a hope—but a hope concretely grounded in experienced historical reality.

Building on similar observations concerning historically common tendencies, Hume could extend the purview of his argumentative strategy to encompass the full scope of the diverse moral sensibilities of his time. Thus, as people become more civilized, their views of utility tend to become more warranted and enlightened.⁵⁸ In the political sphere, such an enlargement of socio-cultural perspective is liable to give rise to the demand for a free government based on the rule of law (E I, XIV, 118). The sense of security resulting from the rule of law, in turn, encourages the advancement of knowledge and commerce. The growth of knowledge inclines people to start favoring “humane maxims above rigour and severity” (E II, II, 273), and milder mores increase the sociable disposition of the mind (E I, XVIII, 168). Prosperity created by commerce affords the material prerequisites for people to satisfy their spiritual and bodily needs in a sociable and cultivated fashion,⁵⁹ further promoting the refinement of manners and mores. People become more concerned with their reputation, with gaining approbation for qualities that solicit the spontaneous admiration of others: that is, precisely the kind of qualities that would be highly prized by the adepts of the fashionable sentimental morality mentioned above. The interest in reputation, finally, distinguishes a civilized person from an “untaught savage” who “regulates chiefly his love and hatred by the ideas of private utility and injury” (EPM 9.8, SBN, 273–4n).

In short, concern with utility may, in the long run, promote a respect for justice; respect for justice, in turn, is liable to give rise to the rule of law, supplying thereby the sense of security which encourages further commercial development. Prosperity combined with security, adjoined to the growing propensity to consider things from a broader historical perspective, produces a refined sensibility which begins to foreground the importance of a generally humane disposition over the more tangible advantages of a narrow-minded short-term calculation. The resulting transformation of the prevalent climate of manners and mores, in return, promotes a demand for further civilizing institutions, which open the path to new venues of political and commercial development.

None of this *has* to happen, of course. It is all a mere possibility. Still, it is a possibility Hume’s contemporaries could reasonably hope for, a historically grounded and practically conceivable state of affairs they could use as a framework for orienting their moral judgment. Insofar as such a responsibly imagined possibility offered a reflection of prevalent moral aspirations, one

⁵⁸Cf. Cohon, “A very brief summary of Hume’s morality,” p. 120.

⁵⁹Cf. Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, p. 151.

would seem to be at least somewhat warranted in employing it as a standard for judging the moral status of historical societies (including one's own) and historical individuals, gauging their progress towards the realization of this provisionally posited, historically grounded ideal. The important point here, above all, is the capacity of a hopeful historical-philosophical projection to convincingly transcend the historical limitations of the actual moral climate from which it originates, all the while remaining thoroughly anchored in this very climate.

VII. TOWARDS A HISTORICALLY INFORMED MORAL CHARACTER JUDGMENT

Critics of the cognitivist interpretation of the general point of view complain that it requires one "to construct in one's mind something that one has never experienced";⁶⁰ and perhaps to judge a person's character from such an artificial vantage does indeed stretch the limits of plausibility. Still, since at least John Rawls's version of the cognitivist interpretation was introduced to evaluate societies and social systems rather than individuals,⁶¹ one may venture a suggestion that such artificial idealized constructions may still be of use in our attempts to tentatively gauge the general level of the moral development for societies as a whole. After all, entire historical societies are also not the kind of thing one can experience.

Nevertheless, the perspective here proposed is quite different from the conception implied in the "ideal observer" point of view. In fact, its distinguishing feature is the insistence on the need to always reckon with our concrete historical limitations. No a priori conception of right and wrong is available to us as a standard, our knowledge is often incomplete, and our reasoning biased and flawed. Still, we are usually capable of tentatively projecting a theoretical outline of historical development hypothetically capable of responding to the full spectrum of our present moral sensibilities, yet going beyond any actual state of affairs that is currently within our grasp. This projection, this hope, cannot provide us with an algorithm for settling moral disputes; what it can do, however, is provide us with a routing point—redirecting the flow of sympathy away from ourselves and our presently entrenched interests—as we try to pass a disinterested judgment on the level of the moral development of past societies and cultures. Hence, we end up judging the past not in the light of the present, but in the light of the future that we can sensibly hope for.

But can a proposal of this sort be plausibly squared with Hume's programmatic resistance to teleology, outlined earlier in this section? There is no reason why it cannot be, as long, that is, as our (essentially pragmatic) rational projections are qualified in an appropriately historical, empirical way. The first premise is that we simply do learn from history; and, while it may be presumptuous to claim that

⁶⁰Davie, "Hume's general point of view." p. 280.

⁶¹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 161.

this learning process is now essentially complete, it would be equally unwarranted to claim that, in the course of our history, we have learned nothing of value pertaining to morality at all. Hume, for his part, had never been opposed to generalizations from experience (E II, I, 254), as long as they remained well grounded, appropriately qualified as tendencies rather than strict causal laws (E I, XIV, 112), with special caution exercised in their concrete historical applications (E II, I, 254). There is, as Walsh once remarked, a fundamental difference between claiming to discern some “inner connection[s]” between historical processes and events and arguing that “history [in its entirety] is wholly intelligible”.⁶² And Hume himself, of course, defends this possibility of amelioration through learning, with the mind rising “gradually, from inferior to superior” as it acquires the ability to distinguish “the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser.”⁶³ The point is not to deny the possibility of such improvement by learning, but to insist that the learning process itself must remain grounded in the concrete historical practices of common life.⁶⁴

We learn from our successes; but just as much, if not more, we learn from failures and disappointments. Our provisionally elaborated projections are fallible. Because desirable convergent developments in history⁶⁵ have, in fact, taken place before, it may not be inappropriate to hypothesize that they may occur again, assisted (probably) by some deliberate practical inventiveness and ingenuity on our part. Entertaining hypotheses of this sort does not commit one to believing that the state of affairs envisioned thereby is either destined, especially probable, or even attainable. The most one can say is that, given prior historical experience, it is not unrealistic.

In other words, we are discussing the possibility of a moral historical *invention*, not a discovery of some pre-existing truth about history itself. Our projections may prove to be unattainable; they may turn out not to be optimal or (ultimately) desirable. Even in the optative modality, they remain thoroughly defeasible. The process of historical learning is not complete. As Hume points out, “the world is still too young to fix too many general truths in politics”; hence, one must always be prepared to have one’s securest notions “refuted by further experience, and be rejected by posterity” (E I, XII, 87).⁶⁶

That, however, does not mean that provisional, defeasible, and experientially funded projections of this sort are either entirely without a warrant or somehow unworthy of claiming our allegiance when it comes to orienting our moral sympathies in the present. After all, we are not talking about moral obligations, but

⁶²W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1955), p. 24.

⁶³Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, p. 4.

⁶⁴Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life*, p. 137.

⁶⁵Of the sort reconstructively proposed by Hume in the above-mentioned case of justice, utility, and manners

⁶⁶Think, for example, of his own growing reservations about the indefinite growth of liberty later in life, as in letters to Turgot, 16 June 1768 (L2, 180) or to Comtesse de Boufflers, 23 Dec. 1768 (L2, 191).

merely about what seems desirable—the possibilities of amelioration. Admittedly this is a weak standard. It might, nevertheless, suffice for our present purpose—that is, contextualizing judgments regarding the worth of different moral characters with a reference to the perceived moral standing of their historical social settings. Stronger proposals may, in fact, prove less desirable, given the warranted suspicion of many professional historians towards “anachronistic” moral judgments in general.

Still, insofar as retrospective historical moral judgments continue to be made (and probably can never be entirely forborne), and insofar as they continue to be made, for the most part, in the light of our own present sentiments regarding what may count as a more desirable form of life, we may be thought to be defeasibly entitled to entertain, in forming our moral sympathies, some promising possibilities of historical development affording us a realistic chance of bringing life into line with our present cardinal moral intuitions; we are entitled, then, to rank various past historical and social formations as lying closer to or further away from realizing these possibilities. How will the future judge our own moral efforts? How will it judge the moral climate of our own time? It is hard to tell. It will, perhaps, compare our actions to those of our contemporaries. It will most likely also be disposed to judge us by the standards of its own. Perhaps another small addition is warranted: it is liable to judge the character of the *vision* that guided our own moral judgments—our moral hopes—as much (perhaps) as our specific actions.