Mental Faculties and Powers and the Foundations of Hume's Philosophy
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> ... While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he shewed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity, in which they ever did and ever will remain. (H 71.99)

Hume is famous for his critique of attempts to make robust use of terms like "**power**" or "**faculty**" in a philosophical or scientific context. But Hume's philosophy is itself structured around the attribution to human beings of a variety of basic faculties or mental powers – such as **reason** or the **understanding**, the **imagination**, and the various powers involved in Hume's account of **impressions of sensation** and **reflection**. Indeed, this is so true that, Hume "never hesitates to infer from the fact that the mind regularly does something of a particular recognizable kind that it has a power to do it and a faculty by which it does." (Garrett 2015, 81) In this way, Hume continues to treat mental faculties as forming something very close to the explanatory bedrock of his new "science of man".[1] So, by contemporary lights, the "science of man" remains unmistakably an exercise in "**faculty psychology**".

1. Hume on Faculties and Occult Qualities

The question is whether Hume is entitled to this – or whether it points to a fundamental instability in his philosophy. To see why one might worry, consider Hume criticisms of *other* philosophers' use of notions like "faculty" or "power". In doing so, we can begin with Philo's criticism in the *Dialogues* of "the philosophy of the Peripatetics*"*:

> It was usual with the *Peripatetics*, you know, *Cleanthes*, when the cause of any phenomenon was demanded, to have **recourse to their *faculties* or *occult qualities***, and to say, for instance; that bread nourished by its nutritive faculty, and senna purged by its purgative: **But it has been discovered, that this subterfuge was nothing but the disguise of ignorance**; **and that these philosophers, though less ingenuous, really said the same thing with the sceptics or the vulgar, who fairly confessed, that they knew not the cause of these phenomena**. ... **These are only more learned and elaborate ways of confessing our ignorance;** nor has the one hypothesis any real advantage above the other, except in its greater conformity to vulgar prejudices. (D 4.12, my emphasis)

Here Hume echoes criticisms of the "Peripatetics" that would have been familiar to most of his readers.[2] But if this is right, why are Hume's references to faculties like "reason" or "the imagination" any better than the appeals of the "Peripatetics"? Why, that is, aren't Hume's appeals to such faculties also only "more learned and elaborate ways of confessing [his own] ignorance"?

A first response to this might be to insist that Hume's problem with "the Peripatetics" relates – not to their invocation of powers or faculties *per se* – but rather to their willingness to posit new faculties in response to narrow and local explanatory challenges. Thus, one might think, what Hume is complaining is not the use of faculty-theoretic concepts *in general*, but "the Peripatetics'" alleged use of such concepts to *cut off inquiry* before it really gets started.[3] In

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[1] For the importance of a focus on mental faculties and their activities for understanding many of Hume's arguments, see for example (Garrett 1997; 2015) as well as (Sayre-McCord 2008; Cohon 2008) and many others. Compare the project of "mental geography" that characterizes the *Enquiries*. See here (Qu 2020), which draws on (Millican 2017).

[2] Especially those familiar with occasionalist critiques of the scholastics.

[3] See Pemberton's defense of Newton from the charge that gravity is an "occult quality" in his *A View of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy*: "**That something relating to them lies hid**, the followers of this philosophy are ready to acknowledge, nay desire it

this sense, "the Peripatetics" would trade in "occult qualities", not because they make use of faculty-theoretic concepts *per se*, but rather because they invoke *highly localized* and *explanatorily unfruitful* versions of them. This is clearly one of the issues that bothers Hume about the methods of "the Peripatetics". But such passages also express a more general skepticism about the degree to which faculty-theoretic concepts can contribute to genuine philosophical understanding. Consider, for example, a related passage in the *Treatise*:

> But as nature seems to have observed a kind of justice and compensation in every thing, she has not neglected philosophers more than the rest of the creation; but has reserved them a consolation amid all their disappointments and afflictions. **This consolation principally consists in their invention of the words: faculty and occult quality**. For it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we would express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recal the idea at pleasure; so it naturally happens, that after the frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent, and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection. The resemblance of their appearance deceives the mind, as is usual, and makes us imagine a thorough resemblance and conformity. **By this means these philosophers set themselves at ease, and arrive at last, by an illusion, at the same indifference, which the people attain by their stupidity, and true philosophers by their moderate scepticism.** They need only say, that any phenomenon, which puzzles them, arises from a faculty or an occult quality, and there is an end of all dispute and enquiry upon the matter. (T 1.4.3.10)

Hume here claims that the "false philosophy" of the ancients achieves by the "invention of words" like "faculty" or "occult quality" the same "indifference" produced more honestly by the "true philosophy" – that is, his moderate skepticism. And this seems a point, not just about the *particular faculties* the ancients posit, but about *any* appeal to faculty concepts within philosophy. After all, the issue here is not just that the ancients posit too many such faculties – rather, it is that their use of such concepts is at best a dishonest way of achieving philosophy's proper ends.

But, once again, this raises the question of whether Hume's own philosophy isn't trafficking in exactly the techniques of the "false philosophy" he here condemns? Why, that is, are Hume's use of terms like "reason" or "the imagination" not ultimately themselves "entirely incomprehensible" in the same way as the use the "Peripatetics" make of such concepts? (T 1.4.3.8) This is, of course, related to the familiar tension between Hume's apparent **skepticism** concerning our cognitive faculties and his positive use of those faculties in constructing his own **naturalistic** "science of man". But its focus is different – and more concerned with the explanatory foundations of Hume's philosophy.

A particularly striking expression of these worries is provided by Hume's famous "second thoughts" in the **Appendix** to the *Treatise*. The explicit focus of the worries there is Hume's account of the (idea of the) self. But those worries point to a more general concern – namely, that, "having thus loosened all our particular perceptions", when Hume proceeds "to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together" he discovers his account to be "very defective". As this indicates, the basic issue here is whether Hume can "explain the principles, that unite" perceptions together against the background of two commitments of his philosophy: (i) "that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences" and (ii) "that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences". (T App.21)

Thus, while the focus of the Appendix is Hume's account of self, the basic problem he is grappling with is how a philosophy that treats individual existences or perceptions as intrinsically unrelated *and* rejects any background

should be carefully remarked, **as pointing out proper subjects for future inquiry**. But this is very different from the proceeding of the schoolmen in the causes called by them occult. For as their occult qualities were understood to operate in a manner occult, and not apprehended by us; so they were obtruded upon us for such original and essential properties in bodies, **as made it vain to seek any farther cause**; and a greater power was attributed to them, than any natural appearances authorized." (17, my emphasis) See also Cotes's preface to the Second Edition of the *Principia*. Thanks to Katherine Dunlop here.

principles of "necessary" or "real connexion" can explain them coming together to form a larger unity anywhere. I take Hume's answer to this question to involve locating the "**principles of connexion**" that tie perceptions together in the activities of the mind, which combine perceptions into complex ideas and associate them together. [4] It is *this* that focuses his attention in the Appendix on the unity of the mind (or our idea thereof). For, as Hume comes to realize there, this account of the unity of complex things presupposes that the mind really does have the power to connect or unite perceptions, which presupposes a unity in the mind which cannot, on pain of circularity, be explained the same way.

It is at this juncture, I think, that Hume recognizes that his complaints against the "Peripatetics" really do draw blood against his own philosophy. After all, considered as an answer to such questions, what are Hume's explanatory appeals to the associative powers of the "imagination", but a "more learned and elaborate way of confessing his own ignorance" of the principles of unity that connect distinct perceptions?[5]

2. Hume's Response: Hume on Causal Powers in General

If this is right, the Appendix worry is (at least in part) that Hume's philosophy might be no better off than the "false philosophy of the ancients" with respect to such questions. But how worried by this should Hume *really* be? For isn't a mental faculty like reason, in the approved Humean sense of those term, just a causal power or bundle of such powers? And if so, can't Hume draw on his account of the nature of such powers to answer our concerns? In brief, if Hume's account of causal powers is a workable one, why is there any *additional* worry here?

Indeed, nearly every reading of Hume on causation treats Hume's *positive conception of causal powers* in a broadly deflationary fashion. For example, if we read Hume as a **regularity theorist**, the notion of a causal power is just the notion of a regularity in how something would respond to certain stimuli. On such a view, there is nothing more to a philosophically legitimate conception of causal power beyond an expectation of a regularity in how things with that power will respond to certain stimuli. An **expressivist** reading of Hume will add something further to this conception – insisting that our full idea of causal power involves a notion of necessary connection which expresses the feeling of ease that accompanies any transition in thought from cause to effect or vice versa. But nonetheless they also present us with a deflationary picture of Hume's conception of causal powers. And the same is true even of proponents of the "**new Hume**". For while they take Hume to posit the existence of causal powers in some more robust sense, they concede that we cannot form any *positive* or *adequate conception* of what these causal powers are for Hume. Thus, on their reading, our understanding of such powers is limited to a merely "relative idea" of them:

> These words, *generation*, *reason*, mark only certain powers and energies in nature, whose effects are known, but whose essence is incomprehensible… (D 7.10)

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[4] T App.20. Hume points to the scope of these worries by referring the reader back to his earlier optimism about the "science of man" in *Treatise* 1.4.5. As this indicates, the Appendix worries show Hume that his "theory of the intellectual world" is not in fact "free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world" in the manner he had hoped. (T App 10). Compare (Ehli 2023), who reads the Appendix as focused on such "principles of union", but limits these worries to our fictional idea of a "principle of union" underlying the unity of the self.

[5] Compare the worries that (Qu 2017) raises about Hume's "dispositional account" of the unity of the self. My reading of the Appendix may also remind some of (Strawson 2011). In his insightful review of Strawson's book, (Ainslie 2012) makes a number of notable criticisms. First, Ainslie notes that Hume might have taken the unifying mechanisms to be brute facts. I agree, but in doing so he would have conceded that his philosophy is no better than the philosophy of the "Peripatetics" on this score. Second, he notes that the worries in the Appendix focus particularly on the unity of the self (or our idea thereof). But this is Hume's focus there because he has already attempted to explain other "principles of unity" in a broadly idealist or projectivist fashion. Finally Ainslie asks, if these worries are so general, why Hume does not reject the whole of his philosophy in response. This is our topic.

3. Hume's Response: Mental Faculties, Teleology, and Analogies in Thought

Given this, one might think that any of these should give us the sort of deflated conception of "causal power" we need to make sense of Hume's positive references to reason or the imagination as powers or faculties.[6] For instance, isn't reason just a complex propensity to associate together perceptions in certain ways? We have already seen one worry about this in our discussion of Hume's "Appendix second thoughts". For that suggested that any of these views may be forced in the end to resort to the tactics of "the Peripatetics" to conceal our ignorance of the principles of connection that bind together perceptions.[7] But there is also a further reason to be cautious about insisting that we can resolve these issues *simply* through an appeal to Hume's general account of "causal powers". For while mental faculties like reason are surely causal powers for Hume, they also *seem* to involve elements that not common to all Humean causal powers as such.

For example, Hume often talks about "reason" as if it has internal *principles* or *rules* for reasoning. And he also speaks of "reason" as if it has its own internal *aim* or *proper function* in some sense. Indeed, this might be taken to be implicit in the very idea that reason is the faculty for "the discovery of truth or falsehood" or Hume's claim that, "Our reason must be considered as a kind of cause, of which truth is the *natural effect*". (T 3.1.1.9, 1.4.1.1)[8] And this picture of reason is also hard to avoid with respect to other passages. For example, consider Hume's reference to "the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and taste" in the second *Enquiry*. (ECPM App 1.23, compare 1.4.1.12) Or his invocation of the idea that there is "always a real, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things" for the operations of reason in the *Sceptic*. (S 13)

Of course, one might dismiss all these passages as ironic. But in fact there is no reason to think that thinking of faculties like "reason" in **broadly teleological** terms is at all foreign to Hume's philosophy, provided that such references are understood correctly. After all, as Hume insists in his discussion of personal identity, when the mind attributes an identity over time to a system of parts, it generally does so because of "a reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some common end or purpose". (T 1.4.6.11) In this way, for Hume, our tendency to ascribe identity over time to complicated systems is based in large part in the degree to which we treat those systems are functioning teleologically in the service of some end.

Moreover, although Hume does not explicitly mention mental faculties like reason in this context, he *is* clear that this sort of teleological organization is characteristic of the identity of *both* artifacts *and* "all animals and vegetables". Indeed, in the later cases, a further element is added – namely, "a sympathy of parts to their common end" such that we "suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations". (T 1.4.6.12) These teleological elements would plainly be significant, for Hume, for the identity of biological organs over time as well. And so, there is no reason to think this would not also apply to mental faculties like reason – *especially* once they are conceived of in a naturalistic fashion.[9]

For this reason, despite what one might think, there is nothing surprising in Hume's willingness to speak of reason in broadly teleological terms.[10] Rather, his own account of the identity of organs and faculties over time implies that, when conceived of as a natural power of this sort, reason's identity over time will be determined in part by the ends

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[6] Kail reads Hume as a proponent of a "brute mechanical model" of reason. But we should be cautious about reading Hume as a confident proponent of the "mechanical philosophy". See Hume's description of Newton's accomplishments in the *History* above.
[7] Compare (Qu 2017).
[8] It is easy to read such claims as attributing to reason a teleology according to which its natural function is (in some sense) to "discover the truth". Compare T 1.4.4.1, and see (Schmitt 1992; 2014; Greenberg 2008; Goldhaber 2020; Lenz 2022).
[9] See the discussion of the "reason of animals" in T 1.3.16.
[10] For the same reasons, we should be cautious about describing Hume's "science of man" as a "non-teleological account of human nature". (Greco and O'Brien 2019) Compare (Schliesser and Demeter 2020).

we associate with it. But while Hume is consistent in thinking of reason and other mental faculties in this way, his willingness to do so complicates the response we are considering. After all, if reason is not a bare causal propensity, but a bundle of such propensities *organized around certain ends or functions* … that is beginning to look, well, "rather more Peripatetic".

So how would Hume think about *this* sort of natural teleology? Here we can begin with what is, for Hume, the easiest case – where we attribute an end or function to some object because we conceive of it as owing its existence – or at least its continuing existence within some pattern of use – to how it is useful and agreeable to some agents. Here we think of the object as structured around certain ends because we literally attribute those ends to the agents who are responsible for the object or its use. Hume would not apply this model directly to faculties like reason or the imagination in the manner a theist would. But this does not prevent him from acknowledging various **analogies** between the order of causes in nature and such artifacts. Indeed, even the skeptical Philo admits that:

> In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms. (D 10.36)

> … the whole of natural theology … resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.* (D 12.33)

Such passages suggest that, for Hume, we may think of human reason as having the end or function of "discovering truth or falsehood", but *only insofar* as this involves treating reason as **analogous** in its structure and activity to a mechanism or artifact with that function. In doing so, we would simply be allowing our thought about reason to be guided by the (natural) associations between (i) the functioning of human reason and (ii) the functioning of a hypothetical mechanism designed for such purposes or ends … but nothing more than this.[11]

4. Hume's Response: Hume's Burkean Conceptual Ethics

This provides with a way of understanding the teleological element in Hume's account of such faculties. But this, on its own, does not explain why Hume actually makes use of such concepts or analogies in constructing the science of man? For surely one should not make use of *every concept* or *analogy* one can invent in that way? So, why *does* Hume speak of reason and other faculties in the way he does? This is, in effect, a question in what has recently come to be called "**conceptual ethics**".[12] So, we can approach it by considering how Hume conceives of the standards that govern the proper use of linguistic terms and the general ideas that are associated with them? For Hume, the proper use of linguistic terms – and the proper use of general ideas insofar as these are partially linguistic in nature – is always a **conventional** matter. So questions about our linguistic or conceptual framework are always questions about potential changes to the conventions that govern our collective linguistic activities.[13]

Given this, I take Hume's basic answer to why we should conform to linguistic or conceptual conventions is that doing so embodies a particular sort of **artificial virtue** – what he sometimes calls "**linguistic propriety**". Crucially, like all "artificial virtues", linguistic propriety is *biased towards conformity* with existing conventions. But, at the same time, it only will recommend conformity *insofar* as it is generally conducive to the ends involved in the

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[11] So, for example, such analogies might themselves be understood in an expressivist fashion. Compare (Holden 2023).
[12] See (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a; 2013b) and many, many others.
[13] See (Schafer 2019), and compare (Ainslie 2010; 2015; Waldow 2020; Lenz 2022).

convention's function.[14] Given this, we can compare Hume's reluctance with respect to "linguistic" or "conceptual" revolutions to his more explicit reluctance to endorse revolutionary political or legal changes:

> But though, on some occasions, it may be justifiable, both in sound politics and morality, to resist supreme power, it is certain, that in the ordinary course of human affairs nothing can be more pernicious and criminal … The common rule requires submission; and it is only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place. (T 3.2.10.1)

For better or worse, it seems likely that Hume would apply this **moderate** "**Burkean conservatism**" to questions in conceptual or linguistic ethics as well.[15] If so, then in considering whether we should adopt a revolution in our use of terms like "reason", we would need to consider whether this use involves the linguistic equivalent of "grievous tyranny and oppression". This helps to explain why Hume continues to make extensive use of faculty-theoretic-concepts in his philosophy, even while systematically undermining their traditional pretensions.[16] After all, Hume is happy to admit that when we reflect on many parts of nature, it is almost impossible for us *not* to think of them in teleological terms. (D 10.36) And given this, and a Burkean conceptual ethics, it comes as no surprise that Hume continues to make use of teleological analogies in speaking about our basic mental faculties.

Of course, such analogies *are* a natural source of various "fictions" and errors. But this does not mean that we should excise them from science or philosophy. For Hume takes much of reasoning to be guided by associations and analogies of just this sort.[17] So while they can be a source of error, and should never be confused with "proofs", it would be hopeless to try to reject them across the board. Rather, our best hope is to be clear-eyed about how they guide our thought and to strive to be guided by ones that actually do serve our ends.

This, then, returns us to conceptual ethics. For, given this, what we need to consider is whether it serves our epistemic and practical ends to be guided in the "science of man" by a conception of reason that relies on an analogy between reason and a machine for the discovery of truth. That is, should we regard claims about "reason" that are guided by this analogy as properly embodying the artificial virtue of linguistic propriety with respect to that term? And if so, is that a term we should make use of given our epistemic and practical aims? Plainly, Hume's answer to these questions is yes. But we can now see why he might be entitled to this. For while this way of making use of "reason" is not free of certain dangers – such as the risk of encouraging excesses of "rationalist or Stoic enthusiasm" – the entirety of Hume's philosophy can be seen as a demonstration that that a "scientist of man" can develop a deeper and less mysterious account of the nature of the human mind while being guided by this analogy, thereby helping to support a form of life that is useful and agreeable to all.

But does this mean that Hume must in the end to appeal to "the tactics of the Peripatetics" to save (or even conceal) the foundations of his philosophy? Well, ultimately Hume's philosophy is no better off than any other when it comes to the need to "confess its ignorance" of certain foundational philosophical questions. And even a "true philosopher" like Hume finds it hard to avoid talk of mental faculties like reason or the imagination in that context. But nonetheless Hume may feel he has the advantage over "the Peripatetics" with respect to two further points. First, his philosophy finds it relatively easy to admit that it is ultimately ignorant of what these powers or faculties really are. And second, it can explain why it is justified in speaking in faculty-theoretic terms *even* given that ignorance. In this way, Hume may feel that his use of these tactics stands up to **reflective scrutiny** in ways the of use of them by "the Peripatetics" cannot.

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[14] See (Sayre-McCord 1995).
[15] Compare 1.3.9.fn7. Note that this is not "conservatism" in a left-right sense.
[16] Insofar as Hume's methodology shifts, these changes seem to be motivated (in part) by his growing recognition of this.
[17] T 1.3.13.25. Compare Hofstadter and Sander on the role of analogies in thought here.