



BRILL

Hume and the Historicity of Human Nature

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Abstract

This paper urges a reconsideration of Hume's role in the philosophy of history. It begins by challenging the common perception of Hume as a proto-positivist hoping to draw from history a mechanical causal account of the unchanging human nature. It draws attention instead to his grasp of historical contingency, the *sui generis* nature of the social world, and the complexity of the relationships of recognition and identity-formation which structure its operation. The paper goes on to examine Hume's position in the light of the idea of the historicity of human nature. It is argued that Hume could be perfectly comfortable with the idea of changes in human nature as well as with the contextual dependence of terms in which human nature comes to define and redefine itself over time. What Hume *cannot* countenance is the prospect of a radical discontinuity within human nature, the potential significance of which is downplayed by his methodological reliance, *qua* a historian, on critical common sense and the moralistic vocabulary of folk psychology associated with it.

Keywords

human nature – historicity – common sense – folk psychology – positivism

Hume's place in the philosophy of history, so far, has largely been defined in terms retrospectively applied to his views by later influential critics. Thus, Hume has come to be commonly regarded as the progenitor of the unfashionable positivism in human sciences,¹ and, following Collingwood's lead, his writings have been often seen as the *locus classicus* for the misguided a-historical

1 H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 4.

conception of human nature.² These charges are related, although not equivalent, and we will deal with them in turn, hoping to become clearer, in the process, about the meaning of the alleged “historicity” of human nature, which Hume’s philosophy, according to his critics, ostensibly fails to reckon with.

Hume’s reputation as a proto-positivist³ and a precursor of the “covering-law” model of explanation in history⁴ rests mostly on his declared ambition to lay down the foundations of the new “science of man,” modeled upon the mechanical sciences, and utilizing the causal form of explanation responsible for their success. Hence, Hume is supposed to represent a mechanistic approach to understanding man’s place in the universe, to champion “the concept of a man as a fixed causal sub-system, operating within a wider causal system,”⁵ and to be committed to a-contextual laws of human nature.⁶ Hegel notably criticized Hume for thinking that history is governed by an impersonal order, wherein individual characters “step forth only as cogs in the machine.”⁷ A similar interpretation has reigned for a long time in the analytic tradition as well,⁸ making the “myth” of Hume’s positivism “the most difficult one of all to dispel.”⁹ The plausibility of a positivist reading is, moreover, unquestionably supported by the well-known passages in which Hume both proudly denies the distinction between moral and natural necessity in historical explanation (T 1.3.14.33, SBN 171; EHU 8.19, SBN 90) and trenchantly insists that the chief use of history “is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature” (EHU 8.7, SBN 83). The problem with such a view is that it tends to abstract the individual from his or her social and cultural environment,¹⁰ neglecting to observe that human life can exist meaningfully only in “an internal relation to forms of social consciousness.”¹¹

2 R. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78.

3 For a helpful list of references see J. Farr, “Humean Explanations in the Moral Sciences”, *Inquiry*, 25 (1982), 57–80, p. 57 (ft. 1).

4 For discussion, see D. Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 187.

5 L. Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 65.

6 C. Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 18.

7 G.W. Hegel, “Fragments of Historical Studies”, *Clio*, 7 (1977), 113–134, p. 128.

8 Farr, “Explanations”, 57.

9 N. Capaldi, “Hume as a Social Scientist”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 32 (1978), 101–123, p. 105.

10 Berry, *Hume*, 166.

11 Pompa, *Human Nature*, 192.

The positivist interpretation has been squarely challenged by a number of scholars who focus their primary attention on Hume's historical work,¹² which has been frequently ignored because of its "glaring incompatibility with his positivist image."¹³ Indeed, reading Hume's six-volume *History of England*, tends to utterly frustrate the expectations raised by his "official" quasi-positivist program. Thus, as Melaney remarks disparagingly, the early volumes (Hume's favorite) are marked by an "old-fashioned view of political agency that does not always appear to be law-abiding," and the "emphasis on personal character sometimes brings him close to restoring the moral typologies of Renaissance humanism."¹⁴ At the same time, there is a conspicuous absence of any prominent generalizations that go beyond common-sense regularities. This pattern, however, feels natural in the context of Hume's chosen historical genre, for he is writing a political history which, according to him, depends too much on particular individuals whose actions should be "ascribed to chance" ("Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," E 1.14.2),¹⁵ and, therefore, cannot be subject to any rigid regularities.¹⁶

What could be "more easily accounted for by general principles" ("Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," E 1.14.5) is the transformation of political institutions, and, indeed, it is possible to read Hume's narrative as built around the development of political institutions¹⁷ or as aiming to explain "the origins of the modern constitution and the party system,"¹⁸ endowing his narrative with a sense of an impersonal teleological order.¹⁹ Yet, as Schmitt correctly points out, Hume explicitly views teleological structure as a principle

12 Farr, "Explanations", 57; Livingston, *Life*, ix; D. Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 9; Capaldi, "Hume", 101.

13 Ibid.

14 W. Melaney, "Hume's Secular Paradigm, Skepticism and Historical Knowledge", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 25 (2008), 243–257, p. 247.

15 References to Hume's *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* are given by book, essay, paragraph number.

16 For more on this point see Livingston, *Life*, 228.

17 D. Norton, "An Introduction to Hume's Thought" in D. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–32, p. 5.

18 Nicholas Phillipson, *David Hume: The Philosopher as Historian* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 11.

19 See S. Foster, "David Hume and Edward Gibbon: Philosophical Historians/ Historical Philosophers: Introduction and Overview" *The Modern Schoolman* 84 (2007), 285–295, p. 289 and C. Schmidt, "Hume and Kant on Historical Teleology" *Clio* 36 (2007), 199–218, pp. 205–6.

“used by historians to organize their narrative,”²⁰ not something pre-existing narration or extracted from the data of the past;²¹ and, once again, we find no fact-supported law-like generalizations that could potentially pass muster under ordinary inductive standards. In fact, the only time Hume invokes the idea of history as a “collection of facts” is to explain why he feels justified in skipping the boring parts of Henry III’s reign (HE II, 3–5).²² His real interests as an historian can be gleaned from his observation that “even trivial circumstances, which show the manners of the age, are often more instructive, as well as entertaining, than the great transactions” which suffer from a disadvantage of being “nearly similar in all periods and in all countries” (HE IV, 44). The incongruity of this attitude with Hume’s “official” doctrine has caused various reactions: ranging from Norton’s view that Hume ended up realizing that history is “no science at all, but at best a mere reflection of each historian’s personal experience,”²³ to Danford’s, who believes that Hume simply abandoned formal philosophical reasoning in favor of pure historical reasoning, since the latter was ultimately closer to common life.²⁴

Meanwhile, those who reject the positivist interpretation of Hume argue that, contrary to his declared intention, Hume does not rely on a single unified explanatory model. Instead, to understand his writings on moral, political, and historical matters we need to supplement the “official doctrine” of the covering-law explanation with a historical or “covering-reason” model,²⁵ whereby actions of agents are explained by finding good reasons that would render these actions appropriate and intelligible.²⁶ From this point of view, Hume emerges as more of an interpretative²⁷ or rationalist²⁸ philosopher of history, with strong affinities for the mode of explanation usually associated

20 Ibid., 206.

21 Ibid., 214.

22 References to Hume’s *History of England* are given by volume and page number according to (London: T. Cadell, 1778) edition.

23 D. Norton, “History and Philosophy in Hume’s Thought” in D. Norton & R. Popkin (eds.), *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Co., 1965), xxxii–xlix, xlvi.

24 John Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason: Recovering the Human Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

25 Livingston, *Life*, 197 and D. Livingston, “Hume on the Problem of Historical and Scientific Explanation” *The New Scholasticism* 47 (1973), 38–67, p. 38.

26 Ibid., 57–8, Livingston, *Life*, 191–2, and Farr, “Explanations,” 57.

27 Ibid., 58.

28 Livingston, “Explanation,” 59.

with Weberian *verstehen*, mediated, in Hume's case, by the philosophically central interpretive mechanism of *sympathy*.²⁹

There is no doubt that this view accords much better with Hume's actual practice of history; however, it also creates a tension in Hume's philosophy, acknowledged by the proponents of the view,³⁰ who also note that Hume never made any sustained effort to reconcile his "interpretationist" model of social life with the mechanical dimension of his "Newtonianism."³¹ One popular strategy for dealing with this seeming inconsistency is to insist on a principled discontinuity between Hume's (earlier) philosophical and (later) historical work.³² Another possibility is to avoid the sense of a break (which sounds implausible in the light of Hume's joint preoccupation with history and philosophy throughout his career) and to suppose that, without the benefit of familiarity with the methodological debates that would occupy the coming century, he simply was not aware of the fact that his different forms of explanation were not "coherently related."³³

Be that as it may, successfully dismissing the charges of narrow-minded positivism does not automatically acquit Hume of failing to come to terms with the historicity of human nature; after all, explanation by reasons is perfectly compatible with the view that human nature is unchangeable and lies outside history. What it does do is open a path to recovering the "image of man as a role-playing or rule following agent,"³⁴ whose self-image is a product of a historical process³⁵ and whose actions are unintelligible apart from the narrative dimension in which this self-image is constituted through the telling of stories.³⁶

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With respect to the notion of "nature" itself, Hume declares that "there is none more ambiguous and equivocal" (T 3.1.2.7; SBN 474).³⁷ The list of things Hume

29 Capaldi, "Hume", 118.

30 Farr, "Explanation", 73.

31 Capaldi, "Hume", 123; also, Livingston, "Explanation", 66.

32 For some references, see Farr, "Explanations", 73 (ft. 30) and Livingston, *Life*, 211.

33 *Ibid.*, 196.

34 Capaldi, "Hume", 101.

35 N. Capaldi, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 310.

36 D. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 218.

37 References to *A Treatise of Human Nature* are given by universal reference (book, chapter, section, paragraph) as well as the page number in the revised L.A. Selby-Bigge edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

claims to be part of human nature throughout his writings ranges from “craving for employment” to propensity to believe in “intelligent and invisible power,”³⁸ with no trace of an attempt to delineate any kind of underlying unity.

Hume does strongly advocate using the idea of human nature as a principle of historical criticism, to distinguish what is ordinarily expected from what is “rare and unusual” (T 3.1.2.8, SBN 474), or as he puts it elsewhere “to distinguish between the miraculous and the marvellous; to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human; to doubt the second; and when obliged by unquestionable testimony . . . to admit of something extraordinary, to receive as little of it as is consistent with the known facts and circumstances” (HE II, 398). Used thus, as Wertz explains, the idea of human nature helps us establish the “very conditions of likelihood, the limits of explanation.”³⁹

This conception of human nature is empirical in the sense that we learn what to expect from experience; yet, it does not seem substantive, in the sense that we do not discover the essence of human nature which would help us render our expectations immune to revision. As Hume points out, our conception of what is usual (and therefore natural) depends strictly on the number of examples we have observed. Like an Indian prince who refused to credit reports of a frost, we may reason justly, given our experiential base, and be mistaken because our limited experience precludes us from seeing a natural and ordinary experience as anything other than a miracle or a lie (EHU 10.10; SBN 113–114). Hume’s ultimate advice is to expect uniformity in the operations of human nature (EHU 8.7; SBN 83–4), yet not to lose sight of the limitations of our experience which form the only ground of our conclusions, nor to “expect that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length, as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner.” (EHU 8.10; SBN 85). It is tempting to say that his methodological conception of human nature is statistical. That is why its application is most warranted in the case of events determined by the actions of large numbers, whereas events that depend on few persons must “in a great measure . . . be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes” (“Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” E 1.14.2). Even with respect to the former cases, Hume warns that “the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics” and, accordingly, he expects that many of his own deductions will be “refuted by further experience, and be rejected by posterity” (“Of Civil Liberty,” E 1.12.3).

38 C. Berry, “Hume on Rationality in History and Social Life” *History and Theory* 21 (1982), 234–247, p. 240.

39 S. Wertz, “Hume, History, and Human Nature”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975), 481–496, p. 488.

With respect to the constant or perennial features of human nature, Hume is committed to the idea of a relative physical uniformity within the species (“Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” E 2.11.1) and to some shared “general structures of motivation”⁴⁰ – as opposed to specific motives or reaction patterns. It may even be plausible to reduce these to the principal motivations discussed in the *Treatise*: i.e. the need for recognition, hatred and love, as well as sympathy for other human beings. Together with Hume’s account of cognitive faculties, these constitute the ultimate principles of explanation, beyond which it would be futile to enquire (EHU 4.12, SBN 30–1 & EHU 7.18, SBN 68; T 1.1.4.7 SBN 13 & T 1.4.6.4, SBN 252–3).⁴¹ However, the level of generality here is such, that these shared structures would be liable to produce qualitatively different effects under sufficiently different circumstances.⁴²

Without this minimal uniformity of the “faculties of the mind,” understanding other humans would be impossible (EHU 8.1, SBN 80–81). Since we are capable of experiencing sympathy (or empathy)⁴³ with others only to a degree that they resemble us (T 2.1.11.5, SBN 318), and sympathy is one of the primary modalities of understanding, without sufficient resemblance of motivational structures we could not understand others in the ready and informal manner that we usually do. In this sense, as James Farr puts it, human nature for Hume “is simply the outer limit of sympathy,”⁴⁴ i.e. the degree of underlying similarity that must be assumed to explain our capacity for mutual understanding.

One, of course, would not expect such a loose definition of human nature from a philosopher who aspired to collapse the distinction between moral and natural necessity (T 1.3.14.33, SBN 171). After all, it is Hume who says that the conjunction between motives, characters, and actions is as regular as that between natural events or bodily states linked by the relationship of cause and effect (EHU 8.16, SBN 88–9; T 2.3.1.12, SBN 403–404). People, supposedly, are no more likely to deviate from their ordinary patterns of behavior than natural processes are to depart from their usual course. Yet, from examining Hume’s examples – the inflexibility of a jailor or the ingrained obedience of a servant (EHU 8.19; SBN 90–1; T 2.3.1.17, SBN 406–7 and EHU 8.20; SBN 91; T 2.3.1.15,

40 C. Schmidt, *David Hume: Reason in History* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 214.

41 References to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are given by universal reference (section and paragraph) as well as the page number in the L.A. Selby-Bigge edition

42 Livingston, *Life* 216.

43 Hume’s usage of “sympathy” is closer to what we would call “empathy”.

44 J. Farr, “Hume, Hermeneutics, and History: A ‘Sympathetic’ Account”, *History and Theory* 17 (1978), 285–310, p. 301. See also Livingston, *Life* 225.

SBN 405–6) – an interesting point begins to emerge: for the causal regularity, here, attaches not to the individual but to their social role; a social role, one may add, that has become for them second-nature. As Capaldi puts it we are dealing with “a cultural form of order not a mechanical form.”⁴⁵

According to Hume, political, social, and ethical life of society is premised on the ability of its members to internalize certain conventional standards and rules of behavior to such a degree that they begin to operate in the manner virtually indistinguishable from the operation of natural law. The great forces of “custom and education . . . mould the human mind from its infancy, and form it into a fixed and established character” (EHU 8.11; SBN 86). This constancy (as well as conventionality) of character, in turn, constitutes an indispensable condition of an orderly perpetuation of social existence, since most of our interactions with others depend on “confidence of the future regularity of their conduct” (T 3.2.2.10, SBN 490). “The mutual dependence of men,” according to Hume, could hardly be possible if they did not have reason to “firmly believe that men, as well as all the elements, are to continue, in their operations, the same that they have ever found them” (EHU 8.17; SBN 89).

Now, the relationships that structure human societies are customary. Discovered through luck, moderate foresight, and imitative behavior,⁴⁶ these relationships differ from place to place, and from time to time, although in each particular place and time they feel (or should feel) natural to the inhabitants. That human behavior is molded by variable social circumstances is a point well-taken by Hume: “the manners of a people” he says “change very considerably from one age to another” (E 1.21.17). Differences of a similar kind obtain between different cultures. These Hume ascribes to the influence of moral rather than physical causes, i.e. to what we would today call “cultural differences.” Thus, he sums up, “the prodigious effects of education may convince us, that the mind is not altogether stubborn and inflexible” (E 1.18.31). It is naturally malleable, in fact; until, that is, a definitive and largely inflexible character dictated by the social conventions is imprinted upon it through the force of custom.

“Custom,” says Hume, “has two *original* effects upon the mind, in bestowing a *facility* in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterwards a *tendency or inclination* towards it” (T 2.3.5.1, SBN 422). One’s character, as a product of custom, consists of a set of dispositions in action and thought that become spontaneously deployed in the absence of

45 Capaldi, *Hume’s Place*, 261.

46 K. Haakonssen, “The Structure of Hume’s Political Theory” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 182–221, p. 188.

countervailing circumstances. As its obverse side, custom produces a certain inertia, and once set “into any train of thinking” imagination is apt to continue “even when its object fails it” (T 1.4.2.22, SBN, 198). Character, insofar as it is a product of custom, shows a similar degree of inflexibility and unresponsiveness to changing circumstances: “perseverance in any course of life,” as Hume says, “produces a strong inclination and tendency to continue for the future” (T 1.3.12.6, SBN 132–3). One’s character, one’s social role that has become second nature, is not experienced by its bearer as something external or imposed. In fact, “there is no self apart from social roles.”⁴⁷ As Hume points out, it may be impossible to distinguish between natural sentiment and “Sentiment from Education” (L 1,151).⁴⁸ A passion that becomes constitutive of one’s character “has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul” (T 2.3.4.1, SBN 418–419).

The significance of the idea of character within the general economy of Hume’s theory of human nature consists in the fact that it enables us to isolate the aspects of personality that are enduring and causally relevant to the conduct of common life and, therefore, capable, at least in principle, of sustaining significant predictive regularities. (Hume’s *own* manner of describing character, however, is entirely informal: Charles I “was very steady, and even obstinate in his purpose,” yet “easily governed” (HE V, 175), while Henry VII “loved peace without fearing war,” “discovered no timidity,” “was commonly less actuated by revenge than by maxims of policy” (HE III, 72–3), etc.) Importantly, for *our* purposes, character and its manifestations are thoroughly historically contextual; for, even when one speaks of the agent’s “natural character,” what is being discussed is a natural disposition with respect to socially significant modes of acting within a particular society, i.e. an aptitude for performing a certain social role. One may object, of course, that while human nature can sustain different habitual roles, it always remains the same underneath.⁴⁹ Yet, as we have seen, causal law-like regularity – and, therefore, the new science of man – operates at the level of character, of a social role turned second nature. Consequently, the laws that such a science is capable of discovering will always be historically local, contextually bound laws,⁵⁰ with, seemingly, no trans-historic universal

47 Capaldi, “Hume”, 113.

48 References to Hume’s letters (L) follow J. Greig (ed.), *The Letters of David Hume*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), in the (volume, page) format; new letters of Hume (NL) follow R. Klibansky & E. Mossner (eds.), *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

49 Berry, *Hume, Hegel*, 153.

50 Comp. Farr, “Explanations”, 67 & 74 and Capaldi, “Hume”, 109.

laws appearing to supplant them. Therefore, unless we discover in Hume a clear tendency to look for transhistorical laws stemming from some underlying universally shared nature, we would have to conclude that the notion of human nature that is most relevant to his new conception of human sciences is always a historically contextualized one.

2

Habits and dispositions that constitute one's character are acquired and manifested within the context of a concrete social reality, and only within this context do they possess their causal efficacy and significance. However, one can grant this and still maintain that there are transhistorical laws stemming from the unchanging human nature which govern social reality through and through. One could argue, for example, that characters or social roles are unilaterally molded by the prevailing set of social arrangements which itself, in turn, is conditioned by the unfolding of some deeper intrinsic properties of human nature dictating the shape of human societies on a macro-scale. In other words, instead of thinking about human nature on the level of individual psychology shaping the pattern of social interactions bottom-up, we could think of the succession of historical social arrangements as being intrinsically determined by some higher-level emergent properties of human collectives, which automatically refit the individual constituents of each generated formation into their appropriately preformed functional niches; to use Hegel's phrase – "like cogs into a machine."

Two separate lines of reasoning show why this picture would hold little appeal for Hume. To begin with, social character cannot be acquired through external conditioning alone; instead, it depends on developing a certain way of thinking about oneself and the choices one faces. What is being internalized by a competent member of a society is not a set of rules (for the most part, we are not aware of any such rules) but a way of imagining a social reality, which endows one with a capacity to improvise an appropriate interpretation for the widest range of possible circumstances and arrangements.

Human character is conceptualized from within as a part of some relevant whole, some field of possible action. One lives in a country, a province, an age, someone whose world does not extend past immediate physical surroundings would count as suffering from a severe cognitive impairment. Action, as well as the setting where it takes place usually acquire their meaning in relation to some vaguely sensed horizon, wherein everything that matters (or most of it, at any rate) somehow comes together. This horizon is never present as

such, nor is it ever fully represented: the sentences intended to reflect its fundamental features supply (at best) some guidelines for individual imagination; imagination fills in the rest as needed. As Long puts it, Hume's view is that "our moral, social and political ideas – our most fundamental representations of our social and ethical context as human beings . . . are powerfully evocative and influential imaginative constructs."⁵¹

One's worldview may happen to be more or less imaginative, the more sober versions deserving the appellation of one's "understanding" of the world. Yet, the distinction is one of degree. Occasionally Hume uses these terms interchangeably (e.g. T 1.3.8.13, SBN 103–4); but for the most part, he identifies understanding with "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (T 1.4.7.7, SBN 267–8). Thus, imagination proper is the view of things that we form on a spontaneous impulse, according to its "suitableness and conformity to the mind" (T 1.4.2.51, SBN 214) while understanding proper is the view that we form upon examining the situation in the light of general rules established by our experience (T 1.3.13.11, SBN 149). Imagination is responsible for what immediately comes to mind (T 1.1.7.15, 23–4), and understanding reflects the verdict reached upon a more careful consideration.

Insofar as understanding arises mostly from the experience of sociality or from education, where the fruits of earlier experience become deposited for common use (T 1.3.9.19, SBN 117), it may show a considerable degree of uniformity within a given historical period and may even be plausibly believed to constitute the outcome of a grander intelligible development. Imagination, on the other hand, is much less orderly and predictable, yet no less powerful in the "secret tie or union" it establishes among the particular ideas (T Abstract, SBN 662); and, at least among the "vulgar," this relatively unruly type of judgment is more common (T 1.3.13.12, SBN 149–50), introducing a radical *contingency* into the way that the commonly circulating pictures of reality are formed. The force of imagination, moreover, operates even in the most prudent of minds, since, without a sustained effort, understanding instantly relaxes itself into the routine mode of cognitive functioning, namely, imagination (T 1.4.2.51, SBN 214).

Society, then, in some abstract sense, may be one; but the ways in which this society is imagined by different groups and individuals within it are many, undermining the notion that the social world in which agents act and form their identities can be credibly seen as predominantly monolithic, homogeneous, or coherent. Charles I imagined himself to be a ruler in an absolute monarchy, while his Puritan subjects fancied themselves to live in a republic (HE V, 236). The character of both parties was thoroughly informed by their

51 D. Long, "Hume's 'Imagination' Revisited", *Lumen* 17 (1998), 127–49, p. 132.

respective vision, and nothing short of war could settle who was right. The vision of a social world held together by an internal supra-individual logic or destiny is thwarted, for Hume, by the intrinsic variability and, to a substantial degree, unpredictability of the agent's inescapably imaginative relationship to the moral world which he or she inhabits.

If we were to pinpoint the origin of the temptation to think of history in terms of a grander destiny, the idea of a sacred providential history – entertained, among others, by the likes of Newton, Priestley, and Hartley⁵² – immediately comes to mind. Within a secular version of such a history, which can no longer cite divine intent as the source of our destiny, the conceptual task of supplying the meaning of history devolves, most naturally, to the notion of human nature. We have two classical strategies for accomplishing this substitution. The first one is Kant's, according to whom the antecedent essence of human nature gradually manifests itself in history, enabling one to discern, through the ubiquity of "folly and childish vanity,"⁵³ a generally progressive trend devoted to increasing our "rational self-esteem" in preference to the "mere well-being."⁵⁴ The other strategy is Hegel's, whereby human nature transforms itself through history to reach, by an orderly succession of developmental stages, the final awareness of its essence as concrete rationality. Thus, we can think of human nature as progressively disclosing itself in cultural life which, in turn, tends to promote the conditions conducive towards the further disclosing of the inherent possibilities of human nature. History, then, is the process by which human nature grows towards the attainment of its maturity. This developmental view is liable to produce a confusion for, here, human nature appears to have a history. However, it is a wrong kind of history – the kind of history that a butterfly has, i.e. a life-history. This is quite different from what we normally mean by "history", although the developmental proposal essentially amounts to a request for treating history proper as the life-history of the species. Thus, if on Kant's account human nature (in some sense) *precedes* history and is therefore intelligible apart from it, on the developmental Hegelian view, it eventually *transcends* history and, by becoming intelligible on its own terms, illuminates its past with the borrowed light of higher intelligibility. In both cases, the ultimate developmental trajectory of human nature appears to lie outside the realm of historical contingency.

52 Livingston, *Life*, 286.

53 I. Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", in H. Reiss (ed.), *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press: 1991), 41–53, p. 42.

54 *Ibid.*, 43.

The obvious thing that precludes Hume from being tempted by such a view of history is his thoroughgoing empiricism. Insofar as history is a purely human affair, it can only be said to possess as much shape or meaning as we can reasonably make out given the presently available cognitive tools and evidence. The distinguishing feature of Hume's view is precisely the refusal to read philosophy into history: for not only does Hume reject all providential history,⁵⁵ he also refuses to develop a substitute for it, whether in the form of illuminating "supra-historical laws"⁵⁶ or by defending "a theory of continuous historical progress, or indeed any other speculative theory of history."⁵⁷

According to Hume, there may be some features of human nature that exercise a constant influence on the conduct of human affairs. Such, for example, is the "avidity . . . of acquiring goods or possessions for ourselves and our friends" which alone is "insatiable, perpetual, universal" (T 3.2.2.12, SBN 491–2). As Berry suggests, the resulting interest in commerce can, in principle, be counted upon to contribute to a steady progress of a certain sort;⁵⁸ yet, this by itself does not imply the acceptance of any "uniform or necessary theory of progress."⁵⁹ As Danford correctly points out, although Hume sees a close connection between commerce and civilization, he also believes that the spread of commerce is partly fortuitous.⁶⁰ In other words, "he does not equate the natural course of things, by which human beings flourish, with the inevitable or even likely course of things."⁶¹ In fact, Hume is convinced that indefinite progress in any particular direction is an impossibility: "the growth of all bodies," he writes, "artificial as well as natural, is stopped by internal causes . . . Great empires, great cities, great commerce, all of them receive a check, not from accidental events, but necessary principles" (L 1,271).

Hume's ideal of civilization consisted in attaining maximum liberty compatible with stability and civility, enabling unhampered growth of science and the arts. He certainly believed that some social conditions are more suitable for dignified human life than others and placed great value on activities conducive to the establishment and maintenance of such conditions. In this

55 R. Popkin, "Hume: Philosophical Versus Prophetic Historian", *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1976), 83–95, p. 83. Also, see Livingston, *Life*, 297–300, Capaldi, "Hume", 103, Siebert, *Moral Animus*, 142–3.

56 Farr, "Hume," 286.

57 Schmidt, *Reason in History*, 407.

58 Berry, *Hume, Hegel*, 102.

59 *Ibid.*, 103.

60 Danford, *David Hume*, 133.

61 *Ibid.*, 135.

regard, one may concur with Berry in saying that Hume's notion of human nature does contain a normative element.⁶² However, experience instructs us that human history is by no means bound to advance towards such a happy state of affairs. After all, the more valuable aspects of human existence may be valuable precisely because they are less common. With the exception of local regularities, e.g. the economic cycles of growth and depression, history appears to be largely a playground for contingency: both with respect to the developments that take place, and with respect to the value of these developments in the peculiar contexts in which they arise. For Hume "the crust of civilization was always thin . . . and never to be taken for granted;"⁶³ and retrogression is always a possibility.⁶⁴ As Wexler puts it "Hume never believed that institutions of human creation were capable of regular, rational development."⁶⁵

A reversal to the patterns of behavior characteristic of an earlier stage of civilization was always considered by him a possibility: partly, because no society is culturally homogeneous and even very advanced societies include members whose forms of consciousness harken back to the more primitive times; but mostly because (ultimately) people comprising every society are the same as in the earlier epochs⁶⁶ and are, therefore, capable of reverting to an earlier state, should the cultural conditions change. Thus, Hume does not believe that our civility could much outlast our civilization: reinstatement of savage conditions would bring out the savage in the most cultivated amongst us. Even the most salutary advancement of liberty, as in the case of England, can subvert itself when liberty degenerates into license (L 2,191), turning the inhabitants of the country into "factious barbarians" (L 1, 417), negligent of literature (L, 1,436; L2, 312; NL 199) and "polite letters" (L 2, 310), bound for "Anarchy and Confusion" (L2, 305).

Hume's view of history as predominantly amorphous can be also seen as a consequence of his naturalist commitments. After all, the sense of orderly development postulated by Kant and Hegel was secured by them through the identification of human nature with reason: for reason can have a progressive history, whether by advancing dialectically to the next stage through resolving its contradictions, or by patiently yet persistently asserting its claims against the forces of childishness and folly. By comparison, it is not entirely clear what

62 Berry, "Hume on Rationality," 243.

63 Phillipson, *David Hume*, 16.

64 Berry, *Hume, Hegel*, 184.

65 V. Wexler, *David Hume and the History of England* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), 88.

66 Berry, "Hume on Rationality," 247.

could be meant by a progressive history of behavioral dispositions, or of passions, or of imagination – the key ingredients in Hume’s conception of human nature. We could, for instance, witness an advance in the prevalence of peaceful sentiments, yet it would be odd thereupon to claim that such sentiments are either more fundamental or more commonly found in human nature. For Hume, then, human nature is a factor in history and its concrete instantiations are always historically conditioned; however, the particular developments that history and human nature jointly undergo are largely a matter of contingency. Our next question, then, is whether such a view of things must necessarily be at odds with the common intuitions about the historicity of human nature.

3

What is meant by the historicity of human nature? Presumably, one important thing to include is the possibility of changes in human nature in response to cultural changes. But more strongly and perhaps, in the end, more promisingly, one would also need to insist on the unintelligibility of the very idea of human nature apart from culture and outside of history. Thus, one could restate the historicity thesis by saying that culture changes, cultural changes are not merely superficial, and culture is constitutive of humanity, in the sense that one’s humanity cannot be understood pre-culturally or apart from culture. “Human” here receives a special, although a familiar interpretation: it is the sense of “human” in which a human fetus is not truly a human, despite being a member of our species. This is also a sense in which one could lose one’s humanity without suffering drastic biological alterations. In this sense of “human,” culture does not merely condition a biological specimen: it transfigures or transforms a *Homo sapiens* into a human being. The meaning of transfiguration, moreover, has to be somehow literal: it cannot consist in a mere recognition or a conferral of social status. A zygote is not a human, even if legally recognized to have the rights of a human being, while a pariah remains human even if, through the cunning of his adversaries, he gets to be treated as a wild beast. Becoming human, in this sense, requires *recognizing in oneself* a conception of humanity which one cannot abandon without (in one’s own mind) ceasing to be a self. Since such conceptions are bound to be historically emergent and culturally mediated there is a clear sense, here, in which human nature – or rather natures – turn out to depend on both history and culture.

But is it true that Hume fails to do justice to this dimension of human historicity? Berry appears to imply as much when, in comparing Hume to Hegel, he reminds us that, in order to come into their own qua humans, human beings

need to be recognized, and recognized as something;⁶⁷ and it is this essential need for recognition which advances human life beyond the naturalistic pleasure and pain calculus.⁶⁸ Our account thus far, however, would seem to largely exonerate Hume from this charge, suggesting instead that the agents' conscious interpretation of their place and role in society forms, in fact, the indispensable basis of the majority of his thinking about historical explanation.⁶⁹ It is, moreover, simply implausible to claim that Hume was oblivious of the human need for recognition, given that the discussion of "pride and humility" occupies one of the three major divisions in the second part of the *Treatise*. There is, Hume says, "nothing, which touches us more nearly than our reputation" (T 3.2.2.27, SBN 501). Whatever advantages one may possess, he claims, will never be sufficient of themselves unless one can show them to the world, thus acquiring "love and approbation of mankind" (T 2.2.1.9, SBN 331–2). "Our reputation," Hume insists, "our character, our name are considerations of vast weight and importance; and even the other causes of pride; virtue, beauty and riches; have little influence, when not seconded by the opinions and sentiments of others" (T 2.1.1.1, SBN 316). And when it comes to history, all those great actions and sentiments, which have become the admiration of mankind, are founded on nothing but interest in pride and self-esteem (T 3.3.2.12, SBN 599). Thus, human beings ordinarily shape themselves and their lives largely in an effort to gain recognition from others.

A somewhat different concern is aired by Pompa, who argues that the terms in which we describe human behavior and motivations only have validity as long as the agent recognizes herself in those terms.⁷⁰ Hence, an historical account which finds the same set of motivations and concerns in the transactions of every age may be insensitive to the historical variability of the terms in which recognition is accorded and cultural identities are formed. Yet, once again, in his practice as an historian Hume shows himself to be fully aware of the problem. For example, Hume argues that different virtues are appreciated in different times: England's Germanic invaders were only capable of appreciating "valor and love of liberty; the only virtues which can have place among an uncivilized people, where justice and humanity are commonly neglected" (HE I, 15).

One source of variation is social, since the popular imagination of an age, or even a clique, would seem to inevitably redistribute the significance

67 Berry, *Hume, Hegel*, 199.

68 *Ibid.*, 200.

69 See Capaldi, "Hume", 113 and Livingston, *Melancholy*, 218.

70 Pompa, *Human Nature*, 63–4.

and approbation it accords to various roles in the historical drama. Another arises from individual variables introduced by the concrete agents who fill these roles. Thus, individual character is essentially a product of adaptation to the cultural and social world constituted by the prevailing policies of self-description within the individual's native milieu. In striving to fill certain roles within this world, the peculiarities of one's natural endowment (as well as other accidents of birth) may often determine the relative plausibility of various alternatives and modes of adjustment, occasionally giving rise to entirely novel possibilities and configurations, as well as to some new modes of valuation. Thus, it is possible for the example of a single celebrated individual to alter the popular perception of the desirability and usefulness of certain character traits already recognized by the group. Moreover, since one's peculiar natural abilities and inclinations may often determine the way in which one goes about trying to fill the role one aspires to, they may also give rise, in the process, to novel patterns of behavior and response, which, within a cultural situation, translate into a sense of the heretofore hidden and unnamed potentialities of human character unexpectedly coming to light. Thus, insofar as character is formed in an effort to fill a certain social role, to become a certain kind of person, and to have a certain kind of life, its formation is thoroughly contextual and contingent, prompting Hume to remark on the essential "changeableness" of human nature, and to regard man explicitly as "a very variable being" ("Of Commerce," E 2.1.4).

Hume, however, is also on record claiming that "in all nations and ages, the same objects still give rise to pride and humility" (T 2.1.3.4, SBN 280–1). Of course, what he points to are very general notions like power, wealth, and beauty, and he immediately qualifies his statement by explaining that the ways in which these are realized depend on specific inventions, tastes, and changing modes of life (*ibid.*) In principle, this seems entirely harmless. After all, the assumption that all human beings would prefer to be seen as beautiful by their peers does not seem any more problematic than the historicist assumption that all human beings are concerned with being recognized as somehow meritorious and admirable by their contemporaries. Both claims have intrinsic plausibility and both are open to challenge. And yet, we may also be dealing with a substantial complication. To illustrate the point, consider, for example, Livingston's suggestion that, although Hume can rightly be seen as embracing "absolute historicism" with respect to concrete events, the need for articulating a philosophical picture of moral understanding prompts him, in the end, to resort to some trans-historical abstractions⁷¹ – i.e. to seek some conceptual

71 Livingston, *Life*, 221.

unity behind the acknowledged diversity. What begs the question, here, from the viewpoint of historicity, is the assumption of the conceptual legitimacy of such a procedure, which seems to ignore the possibility that explanations pertaining to different historical formations may turn out, at least sometimes, to be conceptually incommensurable.

The notion of an historical transformation is not reducible to that of a mere change or increase in diversity. We tend to confuse the two because of our propensity to think of time and history in terms of spatial metaphors. A time long ago is like a place far away, a place we could visit in our imagination, so as to witness our past like we would witness a foreign land, and take stock of the differences and similarities we may discover. But there is a difference between history and comparative ethnography. In ethnography, in principle, one may have a choice with respect to reducing the apparent diversity to discover an underlying uniformity. In comparing different customs we encounter no difficulty in thinking that the same human nature may have expressed itself differently in different circumstances: there is nothing especially perplexing about different cultures finding different natural propensities significant as well as encouraging their members to recognize these propensities in themselves and cultivate them at the expense or to the complete exclusion of some others. With history, on the other hand, the notion of cultural difference is tied to the notion of historical distance, which, insofar as historical discourse remains committed to recognizing the reality of cultural time as one of its constituent conditions, must be understood as at least partially unbridgeable and, therefore, at bottom, radically irreducible.

Let us think, then, of what may be involved in what we call an *historical* transformation. One way to conceptualize this is to imagine that the terms in which we used to describe human behavior and collective existence suddenly cease to be applicable. A cultural mindset, if one may be permitted a crude abstraction, must be understood, for the most part, to be under holistic constraints, meaning that the terms in which it perceives reality derive their meaning from their relationships to other terms. Sufficiently significant changes in the mindset may end up reconfiguring it so as to undercut the grounds for meaningful application of certain terms. For example, “sainthood” used literally would be a meaningless term in the world of an atheist oblivious to the existence of religion. Such “revolutions” are perfectly imaginable in theoretical sciences, including sciences that deal with describing the functioning of human beings and societies.⁷² Changing trends in biology and medicine, for

72 See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* for a classical discussion of incommensurability between succeeding theoretical paradigms.

example, perpetually force us to reassign, re-explain, and reclassify the previously accepted conditions: what once was seen as a benign deviation becomes an illness; what once was seen as a disease ceases to be a medical condition altogether. Some radical changes of this sort could be envisioned to accumulate over time, transforming our understanding of, say, psychiatry or some other disciplinary field beyond recognition.

The problem that this poses for Hume is that by using our present terms to describe and explain the actions of historical agents we may end up assigning to them reasons and motivations which to them would be literally *unintelligible*, all our efforts at translation and elucidation notwithstanding. A weaker, and perhaps more intuitive, form of this argument is given by Pompa who explains that by discovering the same motivations in different historical circumstances we are bound to overlook the specific content of these motivations in each historical context.⁷³ Meanwhile, the historical agents whose behavior we are trying to explain think and define their actions in historically specific terms: e.g. they are driven by ambition to restore their family name, as opposed to by ambition in general; and this sentiment may have precious little in common, besides the generic name, with, say, the ambition to sell twice as many items on e-bay next month. So, by interpreting concrete motivations as mere variations on a basic set of universal sentiments, e.g. “ambition,” “jealousy,” “greed” etc., we risk losing sight of significant, even qualitative, differences between patterns of action that end up being pushed into the same category.⁷⁴

There is a simple line of defense against this argument, which also serves to highlight a crucial, pervasive, and controversial, yet very easily overlooked assumption that underlies Hume’s approach to the study of history and human nature in general, leading us straight to the concluding argument of this essay. To begin with, one can observe that ordinary language terms like “love” and “ambition” do not come with strict meaning criteria. On the contrary, they are radically unsaturated: as casual consumers of stories and anecdotes we are always on the look-out for the new unexpected forms that, say, love or jealousy can take. There is, moreover, no need to make conceptual space for these freshly discovered nuances, since this space is already built into the way that such concepts ordinarily function: namely, as heuristics for finding analogies between different instances and kinds of human experience. Hume once claimed that we never operate with abstract ideas possessing determinate properties; instead, in employing an abstract idea we work with a concrete

73 Pompa, *Human Nature*, 64.

74 *Ibid.*, 47. As Pompa puts it, by treating human nature as constant we blind ourselves to the history of changes in human nature.

instantiation or an exemplar thereof, with other characteristic exemplars waiting in the wings should our original choice of a paradigmatic example prove insufficient, inadequate, or misleading in the case at hand (T 1.1.7.6–1.1.7.15, SBN 19–24). In the case of the ordinary-language concepts that we are discussing, this way of thinking seems, at any rate, more plausible than thinking in terms of definite descriptions, especially if we add the provision that the meaning of a concept (such as love) is intrinsically open to assimilating new paradigmatic experiences into the body of its core content. The reason that we understand Napoleon's ambition has to do with the fact that our ordinary notion of ambition is partially built up from examples like Napoleon. We are not blind to the fact that ambition comes in many forms. But, unless we have special reasons to be apprehensive of a misunderstanding, we could probably trust ourselves to understand enough of what is meant by another's ambition, while being conscious of the partial and informal nature of this understanding.

Causal, rather than notional, continuity provides, here, a sense of a fuzzy sharedness against which differences can be plotted and recognized. Only where such continuity is broken can we expect a total incomprehension. Human nature described in ordinary terms is historical at least in this sense: that the image in which we are made and continue to make ourselves descends to us unevenly through the thickness of lived time, and the meaning that we attach to the idea of humanity represents a cross-section at a particular point in this historical flow, in which something of the previous cross-sections continues on, and something expires without ever reaching us.

This is entirely consistent with Hume's position. As an empiricist, he must accept the idea that our conception of things must be affected by our position in time, since it is this position that determines the evidence and the cognitive tools available to us. Hence, our conception of human nature would have to be different at different times, and by being differently positioned with respect to historical evidence we may lose as well as gain in understanding, or appreciate certain new aspects of the events, while failing to notice others that had been appreciated by our predecessors. So, a certain sense of discontinuity, and even unintelligibility, is liable to obstruct our historical efforts from time to time. Yet, for the most part, Hume unquestionably assumes a sufficient degree of overall continuity to render the failure of sympathetic historical understanding a notable exception rather than a rule. What secures this continuity, if the discussion above is on the right track, is the comparatively continuous nature of the semantic evolution of common-sense terms which form, for Hume, the indispensable (and perennial) basis of an historical explanation. In other words, the sense of a (relative) continuity of human history and, therefore, the sense of the (relative) uniformity of human nature emerge as twin correlates

of the inertia inherent in the concepts of folk-psychology, the use of which, in turn, is sanctioned by the sluggishly evolving common sense to which, on Hume's view, an historian must critically but inevitably defer. It is this conscious methodological affirmation of an historian's obligatory answerability to common sense (and in common terms) that ultimately pits Hume against our contemporary intuitions about historicity.

As Mark Phillips says, "there is a point at which new forms of historical representation reflect altered conditions of explanation or understanding. At such moments, new criteria of significance or intelligibility emerge, with the result that history is not simply populated in different ways, but imagined in new terms."⁷⁵ While commonly accepted, this historicist insight is not a product of critical common-sense reflection; instead, it emerges from a very complex and professionalized disciplinary matrix. Within this matrix, the conditions of explanation and understanding continuously evolve, just as they do in other specialized discourses, remapping the field of inquiry and reconfiguring it each time anew. Our understanding of human nature, in such a discourse, is also bound to be continuously evolving following the new, potentially discontinuous, developments within a constellation of interrelated specialist fields. Occasionally, the cumulative effect of these local displacements will result in major conceptual shifts.

The other option is to anchor our sense of human nature in ordinary informal discourse, assuming that, due to its informality, it can provide us, *mutatis mutandis*, with enough heuristic tools to make *some* sense of any behavior that we care to recognize as being human. This would be closer to what Hume apparently intended with his moral science. Here, human nature would appear constant in virtue of being a regulative idea without a settled determinate conceptual content, for it would merely signal our willingness to improvise an explanation for anything that falls within the bounds of our capacity for empathy (or, as Hume would have it, "sympathy"), which marks the outer limits of our willingness and capacity to understand.

The differences and the relationship between these options are far from trivial or transparent. We have good reasons to believe that scientific knowledge cannot remain constrained by the forms of intelligibility accessible to critical common sense. Constructing a scientific image of history may well require abandoning the humanist predilection for the moralizing idiom of folk psychology. And yet, in doing so, we risk producing in the humanities the same sense of bewildering alienation that already characterizes the mathematized discourse of contemporary natural science. It is hard to gauge the implications

75 M. Phillips, "Hume and Historical Distance", *Lumen* 21 (2002), 1–19, 5.

of such an outcome without a thoroughgoing discussion about the proper ends and uses of history. Meanwhile, we can simply rest with recognizing that what separates us from Hume with respect to historicity does not have to do with the intervening change in cosmopolitan sensibilities about difference and diversity, but with a radical change in our image of knowledge, which (especially in the case of natural science) has rapidly advanced beyond critical common sense, and even beyond critique, towards an entirely constructivist theoretical view, which remains largely unaccountable and impenetrable to common sense. It is not altogether implausible to say that human sciences, including history, may be undergoing a paradigm shift in this direction. If so, then the question of whether we want to retain a rapport with Hume's common-sense view of history, with its methodological emphasis on the empathetic continuity of human nature, turns out to be an unexpectedly timely one.