

The Conflict of the Faculties in Hume: The Position of *Of the Standard of Taste* in the Principles of Human Nature

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David Hume's 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste"¹ has often been analyzed in the historical context of the British tradition of Addison and Hutcheson.² It has perhaps less often been analyzed in the context of the "principles of human nature" that Hume himself had set forth eighteen years earlier in the *Treatise of Human Nature*,³ and when done so it is often only to argue, as does Mary Mothersill, that the later essay does not match the profundity and complexity of Hume's youthful masterpiece.⁴ I want to argue in this essay that this is not the case, and instead propose a reading of "Of the Standard of Taste" that recasts its argument according to the "order of reasons" presented in the *Treatise*. Hume himself, I believe, presumes this order of reasons as the subtext of his essay and builds his argument upon it. To do this I will try to sketch the architectonic of the *Treatise* in rather bold strokes, beginning with the Enquiry into the system of the understanding in Book One (logic), and then turning to the system of the passions presented in Books Two and Three (morals, politics, and criticism).⁵ At the same time, I will try to show, first, how Hume's theory of taste lies at the *nexus* of these two systems, and is constituted by a "conflict of faculties" between the understanding and the imagination, or more profoundly, between "human nature" and fiction; and

¹David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), pp. 226-249. Hereafter simply *Essays*.

²See, e.g., Peter Kivy, "Recent Scholarship and the British Tradition: A Logic of Taste—The First Fifty Years," in George Dickie, et. al., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 254-268.

³David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2d ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1978). Hereafter, *Treatise*.

⁴Mary Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste," in Dickie, et al. (see note 2), pp. 269-286.

⁵The science of Man that Hume proposes in the *Treatise* is composed of these four particular sciences: "The sole end of *logic* is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas: *morals* and *criticism* regard our tastes and sentiments: and *politics* consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other" (*Treatise*, p. xvi). Though Hume abandoned this plan before completing the *Treatise*, eliminating the intended Book on criticism, he felt—as we are assuming in this essay—that he had laid the groundwork for it in the previous books: "The author has finished what regards logic, and has laid the foundation of the other parts in his account

second, how Hume attempts to mediate this conflict throughout the *Treatise* by elaborating a systematic theory of “general rules” that governs each of these two systems and (only partially) resolves the tensions generated by them.

PART ONE: THE SYSTEM OF THE UNDERSTANDING

1. Atomism and Associationism. Hume begins his enquiries with an examination of the system of the understanding, and on this score his starting point in the *Treatise* is famous: in itself, by itself, the mind is nothing but a flux of perceptions, a collection of separate impressions (defined by their vivacity) and ideas (defined as the reproduction of an impression). Hume initially uses the term “imagination” to designate, not a faculty, but just this fleeting collection of impressions and ideas, the totality of their actions and reactions, a delirious and fantastic movement that traverses the universe: nothing here happens *by* the imagination, everything happens *in* the imagination. The imagination is not yet an agent or a faculty, but a place or “theatre” that has not yet been localized or fixed; it is not yet a determining factor but is merely “determinable.” The imagination has the power to pass from one idea to another on its own, but it effects this passage by chance, indifferently, without constancy or uniformity.⁶ It is a pure combinatorial power, hallucinogenic, the source of both madness and poetry, capable of engendering “winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants.”⁷ The imagination in this state is not yet a “human nature,” nor reason, but a species of fiction, a fantasy.

What is the constitutive principle that gives a status to this experience of the imagination? It is *not* that “every idea derives from an impression,” which has a merely regulative sense in Hume’s

of the passions” (p. 646).

⁶*Treatise*, p. 193. Hume’s philosophy, as Kant recognized, is a philosophy of the imagination: “the memory, senses, and understanding are therefore, *all of them* founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas” (*Treatise*, p. 265). Norman Kemp Smith, in *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 133-137, notes that Hume employs the term “imagination” in two ways: first, as the “vivacity of our ideas” (which is what we are referring to here); and second, as we shall see, as the “fancy,” that is, a *faculty* of “feigning.” On the first use, Hume writes that “the mind is a kind of *theatre*, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations....[But] the comparison of the theatre must not mislead us....*We have not the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed?*” (*Treatise*, p. 253).

⁷*Treatise*, p. 10. Cf. p. 123: “A lively imagination very often degenerates into madness or folly....”

philosophy, but “whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are also different.”⁸ This is Hume’s principle of difference: what is invariable in the mind is not this or that impression or idea, but the *smallest* idea. This indivisible minimum, which constitutes the irreducible “parts” of Nature, is neither a physical point (which is still divisible) nor a mathematical point (which is a “non-entity”), but a *sensible* point, a medium between a real extension and a nonexistence: “impressions of atoms or corpuscles endow’d with colour and solidity.”⁹ The first pole of the system of the understanding is thus *atomism*: these sensible impressions and ideas are the atoms of the mind, the minimal and irreducible terms of Hume’s analysis, in aesthetics and elsewhere. Gilles Deleuze has remarked that Hume often reads like a type of science fiction: “one has the impression of a fictive, strange, and foreign world, viewed by other creatures; but also the presentiment that this world is already our own, and these creatures are ourselves.”¹⁰

For the second pole is *associationism*, which demonstrates how *relations* are established between these terms by the understanding, and how they thereby achieve a coherence they lack in the imagination. The three principles of association (resemblance, contiguity, causality) organize ideas and impressions into a *system* or scheme, imposing on the imagination a uniformity and constancy it does not have in itself, and converting the foreign universe of science fiction into our world, the world of common sense, the world of our common life. Without these principles the imagination would never become a faculty, and the mind would never become a “human nature.”¹¹ An atomistic psychology of the mind is impossible, says Hume, since its object lacks the necessary constancy and

⁸The regulative principle is set forth early on in the *Treatise*, p. 4: “All our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent” (p. 4) The constitutive principle is repeated in almost identical phrases throughout the *Treatise*, e.g., on pp. 18, 24, 36, 233, 254: “Every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination.” See Norman Kemp Smith’s commentary in *The Philosophy of David Hume*, pp. 276-279.

⁹*Treatise*, p. 38; cf. p. 27: “In rejecting the infinite capacity of the mind, we suppose it may arrive at an end in the division of its ideas....The imagination reaches a *minimum*.”

¹⁰Gilles Deleuze, “Hume,” in *La Philosophie*, Vol. 2, ed. François Châtelet (Verviers: Marabout, 1979), pp. 226-239.

¹¹*Treatise*, p. 662: The principles of association “are the only links that bind the parts of the universe together, or connect us with any person or object exterior to ourselves.... They are really *to us* the cement of the universe.” “Without them every distinct object is separable by the mind, and may be separately consider’d, and appears not to have any more connection with any other object, than if disjoin’d by the greatest difference and remoteness” (p. 260). On the theme of “common sense” in Hume, see Donald W. Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. p. 17.

universality; what must be substituted for it is instead a psychology of the *affects* of the mind. For though association is a quality that unites ideas, it is not a quality of ideas themselves—what the mere collection of ideas can never explain is why certain simple ideas are regularly grouped into complex ideas. This explanation is given by the principles of association, which are functions that *affect* the terms of the mind by establishing relations between them, and which have complex ideas as their effect.

What then is a “relation”? For Hume, it is what makes us pass from a given impression or idea to an idea of something that is not currently given. For example, I think of something similar: upon seeing a portrait of Peter, I think of Peter who is not himself present. One would search in vain for the reason of this passage in the term itself. The relation is the effect of one of the principles of association (resemblance), and it is these principles that constitute human nature. “Human nature” means that what is universal or constant in the mind is never this or that idea as a term, but only the means of association by which we pass from one particular idea to another. In this regard, causality functions in Hume as a special type of relation, because it not only makes me pass from a given term to something that is not currently given, but to something that has *never* been given to me or even something that is not *giveable* in experience. For example, from signs read in a book, I believe that Caesar lived; having seen the sun rise a thousand times, I say that it will rise tomorrow; having seen water boil at 100°, I say that it necessarily boils at 100°. Locutions like “tomorrow,” “always,” and “necessarily” express something that is not given in experience: tomorrow is never given without becoming today, without ceasing to be tomorrow, and all experience is the experience of a particular contingency. Causality is thus a relation in which I *go beyond* what is given, I express more than is given or even giveable, I *infer* and *believe*. In making a judgment, I affirm more than I perceive, my judgment goes beyond the idea, it establishes a relation that goes beyond the sensible given—in short, the mind becomes a subject, fantasy becomes human nature. What Hume calls “human nature” is founded upon fantasy, but it is constituted by principles.

2. The Empiricist Thesis. The system of the understanding, then, is constituted by these two poles: atomism as a physics of the mind and associationism as a logic of relations. What is the significance of this bipolar structure? The history of philosophy has more or less absorbed empiricism by defining it primarily in terms of its atomism, as the inverse of rationalism, a critique of innateness and the *a priori*: yes or no, is there anything in our ideas that does not come from the senses

and the sensible? The empiricist thesis, it is said, is that *knowledge is derived from experience*: everything finds its origin in the sensible, and in the operations of the mind upon the sensible. But Hume does not invoke the concrete richness of the sensible in order to turn it into a simple and abstract first principle. He ridicules “that love of simplicity which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy.”¹² Instead, most of the *Treatise* is installed at the level of the second, third, and fourth principles—in the middle, so to speak, rather than at the origin. Hume throws down a gauntlet to his interlocutors: “Show me the idea you claim to have!” But for almost every complex idea that Hume considers (causality, the existence of the world, the self, and so on), the search for the linear path that would allow him to reduce an idea to its corresponding impression leads almost immediately to an impasse.¹³ Instead, Hume attempts to unravel the more complex tissue of principles that habitually bind together separate impressions and ideas in order to produce ideas (in another sense) which are not copies but inferences, and which affirm more than is really given. The *origin* of ideas (reduction to atomistic impressions) is insufficient to explain their *formation* (elaboration of associationist principles).

Thus, to be rigorous, we must say that the true thesis that lies at the base of Hume’s empiricism, to borrow Russell’s formula, is that *relations are external to their terms*, and depend on other principles.¹⁴ The originality of Hume’s thought, I believe, lies in the force with which he affirms this thesis. It is true that empiricism, from Locke and Hume, to Russell and Whitehead, has always militated in favor of the exteriority of relations, but its position in this regard to a certain degree had remained hidden behind the problem of the origin of knowledge or ideas.¹⁵ In shifting the emphasis to association, Hume effected an inversion that carried empiricism to a higher power: if ideas contain neither more nor less than sensible impressions, it is precisely because relations are exterior and heterogeneous to their terms (impressions or ideas). The essential distinction in Hume is not between impressions *and* ideas, between the sensible and the intelligible, but rather between two sorts

¹²David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3d edition, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 298. Hereafter *Enquiries*.

¹³For instance, in his discussion of personal identity, Hume writes, “Nor have we any idea of the *self*, after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression cou’d this idea be deriv’d?...Self or person is not any one impression...” (*Treatise*, p. 251).

¹⁴Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), ch. 3, pp. 95ff.

¹⁵See, for instance, Locke’s discussion of relations in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Sections 15-18.

of impressions and ideas: impressions and ideas of terms, *and* impressions and ideas of relations. If Hume is opposed to rationalism, it is because he opposes any tendency to reduce the paradox of relations, either by finding a means of making the relation interior to its terms, or by discovering a more comprehensive and more profound term to which the relation itself would be interior. “Peter is smaller than Paul”: this relation is not something internal to Peter or Paul, or to their concept, or to the whole that they form, or to the Idea in which they participate. In Hume, the empiricist world was deployed for the first time in its full extension—a conjunctive world of atoms and relations which would not find its complete development until Russell and modern logic.

3. The Question of “Human Nature” (Subjectivity). Now in locating the destiny of Hume’s empiricism in associationism rather than atomism, we are at the same time affirming that Hume is interested less in the origin of the mind than in the constitution of human nature: the theory of associationism is at the same time a theory of subjectivity—or more precisely, a theory of “human nature.” For if relations are exterior to their terms, if relations do not have as their cause the real properties of ideas, if they have other causes, these other causes determine a subject, which alone establishes relations. In Hume, human nature is constituted through the effect of “universal principles” that affect it, which give the imagination a certain regularity and *at the same time* constitute a subject within the collection of perceptions.¹⁶ These are precisely what Hume calls “the principles of human nature,” namely, the principles of understanding (association) and, as we shall see, the principles of passion (utility). The subject, human nature, is that agency which, under the effect of the principles of association, establishes relations between ideas, and under the effect of the principle of utility, pursues an aim, an intention, organizes means in view of an end. To say that the imagination is affected by principles means that the original collection of perceptions is *qualified* as an actual, partial subject. Human nature is the imagination, which other principles have fixed and rendered constant, naturalized.¹⁷

¹⁶*Treatise*, p. 10: “As all simple ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases, nothing wou’d be more unaccountable than the operations of that faculty, were it not guided by some *universal principles*, which render it, in some measure, uniform with itself in all times and places.”

¹⁷Each of the principles of association are addressed to a particular aspect of the mind: contiguity, to sense; causality, to time; and resemblance, to the imagination (*Treatise*, p. 11). But their point of commonality is that they designate a quality that conducts the mind *naturally* from one idea to another (p. 10), and the fact that one idea naturally introduces another is not a quality of the idea, but

This, as Deleuze has argued, is what marks off Hume's critical project from Kant's. If, simply put, the question posed by Kant's transcendental critique is, How can something be given to the subject? How can the subject give something to itself? the constitutive question of Hume's empirical critique is, on the contrary, How is the subject constituted within the given? How does the mind become a subject, a human nature?¹⁸ In Hume, the given is not given to a subject; rather, the subject is constituted within the given. Thus the definition of empiricism as a theory according to which knowledge is derived from experience is at best a partial definition. For if we call experience the collection of distinct perceptions, we must recognize that relations themselves do *not* derive from experience; they are the effect of the principles of association, the principles of human nature which, within experience, constitute a subject capable of going beyond experience. The notion of the "given" thus has two senses in Hume: what is given is experience, the collection of ideas and impressions in the mind or the imagination; but what is also given, within this collection, is the subject that goes *beyond* experience, what is also given are relations that do not depend on ideas or impressions. Thus, although Hume's empiricism must finally be defined by a dualism between terms and relations, between the given and the subject that goes beyond the given, between the hidden powers of Nature (the causes of perceptions) and the principles of human nature (the causes of relations)—in short, between atomism and associationism—it is the latter term in each of these pairs that constitutes the primary object of Hume's philosophy.¹⁹

a quality of human nature. On this theme of naturalism in Hume, see Norman Kemp Smith's well-known article, "The Naturalism of Hume" I and II, *Mind*, Vol. 14 (1905).

¹⁸Gilles Deleuze, *Empirisme et subjectivité* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1953), pp. 90-92, 118-121.

¹⁹Kant will break with Hume on precisely this point. As a question of fact (*Quid facti*), there is indeed an "accord" between Nature (atomism) and human nature (associationism). But what is the nature of this accord? Hume and Kant both agree that knowledge implies subjective principles by means of which we go beyond the given. Yet we would quickly lose the opportunity to exercise our principles if experience itself did not *confirm* our going beyond, if the given did not submit to our moves. If the sun sometimes rose and sometimes did not, "our empirical imagination would never find opportunity for exercise appropriate to its powers, and so would remain concealed within the mind as a dead and to us unknown faculty" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A100). Kant concludes that the subjectivity of principles cannot be merely an empirical or psychological subjectivity but, as a question of right (*Quid juris*), must be a "transcendental" subjectivity: the givens of experience (Nature) *must* obey the *same* principles as those which govern the course of our ideas (human nature). This is the fundamental idea of Kant's Copernican revolution: the substitution of the principle of a *necessary* submission of object to subject for Hume's idea of a sort of "preestablished" harmony between subject and object (*final* accord—see *Enquiries*, p. 54). In Kant, *relations depend on the nature of*

4. The Role of the Understanding in Taste (the first moment in Hume's definition of taste). We are now in a position to briefly define the first moment of a formal definition of taste, one that is derived from these two principles that demarcate the system of the understanding: what Hume calls "delicate taste" is, *in part*, the ability to discern these elements and relations in works of art. On the one hand, "it is acknowledged to be the perfection of every sense or faculty, to perceive with exactness its most minute objects, and allow nothing to escape its notice and observation."²⁰ Anyone who cannot perceive these atomic, simple, or differential elements cannot be said to possess a *delicacy* of taste: "When you present a poem or picture to a man possessed of this talent, the delicacy of his feeling makes him be sensibly touched *with every part of it*."²¹ On the other hand, the delicate taste must also be able to perceive the associations established between these elements: "In all the nobler productions of genius, there is a mutual *relation* and *correspondence* of parts," and to the person lacking delicacy of taste "the relation of parts is not discerned." Thus, writes Hume, the understanding, "if not an *essential* part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty."²² The essential part of taste lies in the passions, and we shall see below why the faculty of understanding (as the discernment of elements and relations) plays a "requisite" but necessarily limited role in the domain of taste.

5. Extensive and Corrective General Rules. But fiction and human nature, terms and relations, are distributed in the system of the understanding in a much more complex fashion than we have yet determined. The principles of association, we have seen, impose constant laws upon the mind, which discipline the fictions of the imagination and, in the case of causality, provide a rule of *extension* that allows the mind to go beyond what is given in experience. Hume explains this functioning of the causal relation in terms of *habit*. Experience itself merely presents to the mind a multiplicity of independent cases of constant conjunction (every time I see A it is followed or accompanied by B). Habit is a principle by which the imagination establishes a union or temporal

terms in the sense that, as phenomena, things presuppose a synthesis whose source is the *same* as the source of relations.

²⁰"Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays*, p. 247.

²¹"Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," in *Essays*, p. 4 (emphasis added). Cf. *Enquiries*, p. 291: "It is on the proportion, relation, and position of parts, that all natural beauty depends."

²²"Of the Standard of Taste," pp. 248-249.

synthesis of these repeated cases (when A appears, I now *expect* the appearance of B). The role of the imagination in habit is to extract something *new* from a repetition, and what it extracts is a *belief*.²³ Hume in this way places belief at the base of the understanding.

But a strange and famous battle unfolds from this. For Hume shows that the imagination can, in turn, make use of the very principles that fix it in order to circumvent these *same* principles and give them a new extension, thereby conferring upon its own beliefs and fictions a legitimacy that they do not possess in themselves. “There are no ideas that are different from each other,” writes Hume, “which the imagination cannot separate, and join, and compose into all the varieties of fiction.”²⁴ The *Treatise* presents a detailed typology of such fictive links. The imagination, for instance, can “transfer our experience to objects which are *resembling*, but are not exactly the same with, those concerning which we have had experience.”²⁵ Or it can form a belief rashly, on the basis of too few repetitions, which is one of the sources of prejudice and bigotry: from one or two encounters, I conclude that “an Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity.”²⁶ And above all, in the case of *causality*, the imagination is capable of forging *fictive* causal chains, sometimes by confusing the accidental with the essential,²⁷ sometimes by substituting for a really observed repetition a merely spoken repetition that simulates its effect. Thus the liar, by repeating his or her lies, winds up believing them; the student believes in the ideas repeatedly presented to him or her through education; and even the philosopher, by dint of speaking of “faculties” and “occult qualities,” believes that that these words “have a secret meaning, which we might discover by

²³“*Experience* is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. *Habit* is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, made me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than other, which are not attended with the same advantages.”

²⁴“Abstract,” in *Treatise*, p. 662.

²⁵*Treatise*, p. 147; cf. p. 148: “The same custom goes beyond the instances, from which it is deriv’d, and to which it perfectly corresponds; and influences [one’s] ideas of such objects as are in some respect resembling, but fall not precisely under the same rule.”

²⁶*Treatise*, p. 146: we have a strong tendency to follow “general rules, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call prejudice.”

²⁷For example, to a man afflicted with vertigo, “the [accidental] circumstances of depth and descent strike so strongly upon him that their influence cannot be destroy’d by the contrary [essential] circumstances of support and solidity, which ought to give him perfect security” (*Treatise*, p. 148). Likewise, “we observe that the vigor of conception, which fictions receive from poetry and eloquence, is a circumstance merely accidental, of which every idea is equally susceptible; and that such fictions are connected with nothing that is real” (p. 631).

reflection.”²⁸ All such feigned relations produce illegitimate beliefs, and taken together they form the collection of “general rules” that Hume calls *unphilosophical probability*.²⁹

In such cases, we do not go beyond experience on the path of a science that could be confirmed by Nature itself; rather, we go beyond experience in every direction through a second-order delirium that forms a kind of counter-Nature. The conditions of this new delirium lie in the nature of habit. Habit is a power of progression, production and invention that is formed progressively: since habit “arises from the frequent conjunction of objects, it must arrive at its perfection by *degrees*, and must acquire a new force from each instance that falls under our observation.”³⁰ What is a principle, in other words, is not this or that habit, but the habit of *contracting* habits from experience. But since habit is a principle *other* than experience, *the unity of habit and experience is not a given*, it cannot be presupposed: *the imagination can “feign” habits, it can infer fictive relations, invoke false experiences, and produce beliefs by “a repetition, as is not derived from experience.”*³¹ The imagination cannot believe without at the same time falsifying belief, and habit cannot invoke experience without falsifying it. Here Kant owes Hume something essential: we are not simply led astray by error, but even worse, we are steeped in illusion, menaced by illegitimate exercises of our faculties and illegitimate functionings of relations.

Such fictions, says Hume, can only be *corrected* by applying a second set of general rules, which Hume calls rules of *philosophical probability*. “All the rules of this nature,” writes Hume, “are

²⁸*Treatise*, pp. 116-117, 224. See also David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1947), pp. 162-163. For Hume, words in general have the effect of producing “counterfeit beliefs,” “chimeras,” which explains the power of eloquence and poetry, as well as the seductions of credulity and superstition, and makes the philosophical critique of language necessary (cf. *Treatise*, p. 123).

²⁹See *Treatise*, Book 1, Section 13. Cf. p. 562: “Strict adherence to any general rules...are virtues that hold less of reason, than of bigotry and superstition” (p. 562). We “have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation” (p. 113).

³⁰*Treatise*, p. 130. Each of these determined degrees of habit is what Hume calls “probability” (cf. *Treatise*, p. 130-131: “Before [our judgment] attains this pitch of perfection, it passes thro’ several inferior degrees, and in all of them is only to be esteem’d a presumption of probability”). But habit is nonetheless presupposed as a principle by probability, since each degree is, from the point of view of one object, only the presumption of the existence of another object that *habitually* accompanies the first (cf. p. 90).

³¹*Treatise*, p. 140. “Habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many cases *prevails over*, that which arises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects” (p. 116). “The custom of *imagining* a dependence, has the same effect as the custom of *observing* it would have” (p.

very easy in their invention, but extremely difficult in their application.”³² These rules (which, as Passmore shows, are in fact derived from Newton) allow the understanding to determine the real parts of Nature and experience, to determine “when objects *really are*...causes and effects to each other,” and thus to separate the accidental from the essential, to ascertain true “matters of fact.”³³ It can then enumerate the relevant number of past instances, examine the proportions that exist between them, and finally, determine the resulting degree of quantitative probability (knowledge, proofs, probabilities as kinds of evidence). It is only through such a severe “calculus” of probabilities that belief can be maintained within the limits of the understanding, and habit within the limits of past experience.³⁴

Thus, at the heart of the system of the understanding lies a critique of general rules *by* general rules: on the one hand, there are *extensive* rules that determine the exercise of causality relative to experience; and on the other hand, there are *corrective* rules that critique the illegitimate exercises of such extensions outside of experience by the imagination. These two sets of rules, though they are “in a manner set in opposition to each other,” are nonetheless the effect of the same principle, habit: “The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet ‘tis only by following them that we can *correct* this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities.”³⁵ But there is a difference: in the first set of rules, habit operates on the imagination “*immediately*, without any time for reflection.” To be legitimate, to dissipate the illusions of the imagination, reason must be derived “not directly from the habit, but in an *oblique* manner.”³⁶ The adequation between habit and experience, in other words, is reflective and can only be attained experimentally, as the result of a “scientific” effort.

6. The “World” as an Uncorrectable Fiction. But there is yet a third moment in this conflict between the imagination and the understanding, between fiction and human nature. In some

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³²*Treatise*, p. 175.

³³*Treatise*, p. 173, 175 (in I, 3, 15: “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects”); cf. p. 149. See John Passmore, *Hume’s Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 1952), pp. 51 ff.

³⁴Cf. *Treatise*, Book 1, Part 3, Sections 11 and 12 (see esp. pp. 149-150). Only such a calculus can account for “the *reasons* which determine us to make the past a standard for the future, and the *manner* how we extract a single judgment from a contrariety of past events” (pp. 133-134).

³⁵*Treatise*, p. 150.

³⁶*Treatise*, p. 133; cf. p. 104. On the relationship between these two sets of general rules, see

of his most subtle and difficult analyses, Hume denounces the three great terminal ideas of metaphysics (Self, World, and God) as illegitimate beliefs that depend upon fictive functionings of relations. Yet at the same time he shows, paradoxically, that these illusions are *uncorrectable*, that they are inseparable from legitimate beliefs, indispensable to their organization, and thus are themselves a part of human nature.

In the *Dialogues*, for instance, Hume shows how the idea of God is derived from fictive uses of the relations of resemblance and causality. Natural religion claims to prove the existence of God through his effect, the World. It perceives a *resemblance* between the World and a machine, and then affirms the necessity of an intelligent author: from similar effects, we infer similar causes. But the resemblance between the World and a machine is purely *accidental*, partial, and remote; one could just as easily find the analogy on other modes of operation, neither more nor less partial, and sometimes even more justifiable—generation, for example, or vegetation.³⁷ All cosmogonies are founded on such accidental analogies, and are equally imaginary, fantastic, and illusory. And this illusory aspect of natural religion is manifested even more clearly in the “proofs” founded on *causality*. In causal reasonings, one must maintain a rigorous proportion between the cause and the effect, but Hume shows how a believer like Demea inordinately inflates the cause, affirming a disproportionately large God, and then, in order to fill up the gaps that separate God from his effect, invokes unknown effects (principally the future life). Conversely, a believer like Cleanthes inordinately inflates the effect, affirming order and finality everywhere in the World, while denying disorder and the intensity of human evil, thereby constituting God as the adequate cause of an arbitrarily beautified World.³⁸ In the proofs founded on causality, religion goes beyond the limits of experience, just as, in the proofs founded on analogy, religion confuses the accidental with the essential. The idea of God, in short, is formed through a *purely* fantastic use of the principles of association that is immediately illegitimate, arbitrary, and fictive. The correction of the understanding here results in a *total* critique that allows nothing to subsist. Religion is *denied* rather than corrected, and Hume generally tends to exclude religion and everything connected with it (e.g., the “monkish virtues”) from the realm of culture.³⁹

Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, pp. 42-64.

³⁷“The world plainly resembles more an animal or a vegetable, than it does a watch.” *Dialogues*, Part 7, pp. 176-181, esp. p. 176.

³⁸*Dialogues*, Part 10, pp. 193-202.

³⁹Compare, for example, Hume's application of the calculus of probabilities to miracles, which

Yet at the end of the *Dialogues*, as well as in several other texts, Hume surprisingly turns this negation of theism into its justification.⁴⁰ For if we cannot make use of the principles of association to go beyond experience to know God as the cause of the World, Hume argues, we can nonetheless think of God negatively as the *cause* of the principles themselves. Hume often explains that the principles of human nature can only be studied through their effects, as laws of nature; philosophy must remain mute concerning the cause of these principles and the origin of their power.⁴¹ That place is free for God: God can be *thought* (through the imagination), though not *known* (through the understanding), as the original accord of human nature with Nature itself. From this perspective, Hume thinks theism is justifiable. The idea of God, unable to know its object, becomes a part of the fictive world of culture, and indeed achieves it—it is the Idea of the moral world: its sole content,

results in a total subtraction, “an entire annihilation” (“Of Miracles,” in *Enquiries*, p. 127). A miracle is “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity” (p. 115n), and thus it seems by definition to stand opposed to past experience and to lie outside the calculus. Hume turns this argument back upon itself: miracles do in fact imply past experience, since they above all must invoke the past testimony of human witnesses. The witness of the miracle is the one who says, “I saw, I touched,” and the authority of Scripture rests primarily on the apostles as ocular witnesses. Miracles are in this way drawn back into the very field that they combat, and find themselves dissolved or subtracted: “It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but *subtract* the one from the other, with that assurance that arises from the remainder” (p. 127).

⁴⁰For example: (1) At the end of the *Dialogues*, after having been discredited throughout, finality is reintroduced. (2) At the end of the essay “Of Miracles,” after having shown that the belief in miracles is a false belief, Hume writes that such a belief itself is a true miracle (cf. *Enquiries*, p. 131: “Whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience”). (3) At the end of “Of the Immortality of the Soul,” after having shown that belief in the immortality of the soul is in no way justified, and in certain respects even demented, Hume again impugns reason, demanding certitude from revelation. (4) And in *The Natural History of Religion* (ed. H. E. Root [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956]), one of the first attempts at a history of religion, Hume distinguishes two sources of the religious sentiment—(1) human passions, the events of life that are irreducible to unity, the succession of hopes and fears, which produce, by their reflection in the imagination, polytheism or idolatry, and (2) and the observation of the unity of nature which, by another reflection, produces theism—and goes on to argue that theism is a *correction* of idolatry, and brings religion back into the limits and conditions of its proper exercise. The apparent contradiction lies in the fact that Hume has already argued that it is precisely the conditions of a legitimate observation of Nature itself which prevents us from extracting, by resemblance or by causality, the least conclusion concerning God.

⁴¹*Treatise*, p. 13.

Hume says at one point, is the exercise of virtue.⁴²

But the fundamental equivocation in these proofs rests on the idea of the *World*.⁴³ For when religion invokes causality, it goes beyond the conditions in which causality can legitimately be exercised: “It is only when *two* species of objects are found to be constantly conjoined, that we can infer the one from the other; and were an effect presented, which was entirely *singular*, and could not be comprehended under any known species, I do not see, that we could form any conjecture or inference at all concerning its cause.”⁴⁴ This is precisely the status of the *World*: it is the singular, the unique, the exception, the accident. It is not a member of any species, it is not an object, it cannot be repeated. There are no objects except those in the World, but the World itself is not an object. It is a theme of the imagination, a fiction or fantasy, that can never enter as a term in a legitimate causal relation. In his theory of identity (the continuous and distinct existence of objects), Hume utilizes his critical method to demonstrate the fictive character of the external World. For if I attribute to objects a *continuous* existence, it is through a fictive causal reasoning that confers upon objects a coherence and regularity than I can never observe in my perceptions. And if I attribute a *distinct* existence to objects, I affirm a false causal relation between the object and the perception, forgetting that I do not know the object apart from the perception I have of it, and that causality is legitimated only when we discover the conjunction of (at least) *two* existences in past experience.⁴⁵ Continuity and distinction are denounced as illusions that designate something that can never be legitimately derived from experience.

But this is where Hume’s argument takes a notorious twist. For he shows that with the Idea of the World, *the fiction becomes a principle of human nature*, which must coexist with the other principles. The fictions of continuity and distinction (upon which the idea of the Self also depends) cannot and indeed must not be corrected. The effect of the principles of human nature is to transform the mere *collection* of ideas in the mind into a *system*, a system of knowledge and the knowledge of objects. But

⁴²*Enquiries*, p. 147: some humans “suppose that the Deity will inflict punishment on vice, and bestow rewards on virtue...Whether this reasoning of theirs be just or not, is no matter. Its influence on their life and conduct must still be the same. And those, who attempt to disabuse them of such prejudices, may, for aught I know, be good reasoners, but I cannot allow them to be good citizens and politicians.”

⁴³See Book 1, Part 4, esp. Section 2, “Of Scepticism With Regard to the Senses,” pp. 187-218. A fine analysis of these passages can be found in Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life*, esp. Chapter 1, “Post-Pyrrhonian Philosophy,” pp. 9-33.

⁴⁴*Enquiries*, p. 148.

the system will only be complete when we go beyond the intervals that interrupt our perceptions, and give to objects an idea that does not depend on our senses “by *feigning* a continued being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perceptions.”⁴⁶ In other words, the system is achieved only when it is identified with the external World. The *system* is the product of the principles of nature, while the *World* is a direct fiction of the imagination: the fiction necessarily becomes a principle.

The conflict between the imagination and the understanding here becomes an outright contradiction. The imagination is opposed *as a principle*, the principle of the World (continuity and distinction), to the principles of the understanding that fix the imagination and the operations that correct it (which denounce continuity and distinction).⁴⁷ But in becoming a principle, the fiction can neither be corrected nor destroyed by the reflections of reason: Hume’s Enquiry into the understanding, which began in fantasy and delirium, ends in a “disorder of the faculties,”⁴⁸ a kind of schizophrenic dementia in which we have no means of choosing the understanding over the suggestions of the imagination, no means of separating reason from its delirium, its “permanent, irresistible and universal” principles from its “changeable, weak, and irregular” principles.⁴⁹ “We have no choice left,” Hume concludes, “but betwixt a false reason and none at all.”⁵⁰

This is Hume’s famous irony pushed to its highest point: the beliefs of a large part of our nature are completely illegitimate from the point of view of the principles of human nature. It is from this point of view that we must comprehend the complex “drama” of modern skepticism that Hume elaborates. If ancient skepticism rested on the variety of sensible appearances and the errors of the senses, modern skepticism rests on the exteriority of relations with regard to their terms. The first act of modern skepticism shows how the principles of human nature fix the imagination by “naturalizing” *belief* and placing it at the base of the understanding, that is, by defining knowledge as a legitimate belief (extensive general rules). The second act consists in the discovery that the

⁴⁵*Treatise*, pp. 195-198, 212.

⁴⁶*Treatise*, pp. 207-208.

⁴⁷*Treatise*, p. 215: “This philosophical system is *the monstrous offspring of two principles*, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac’d by the mind, and which *are unable mutually to destroy each other*. The imagination tells us, that our resembling perceptions have a continued and uninterrupted existence, and are not annihilated by their absence. Reflection tells us, that even our resembling perceptions are interrupted in their existence, and different from each other.”

⁴⁸*Treatise*, p. 264.

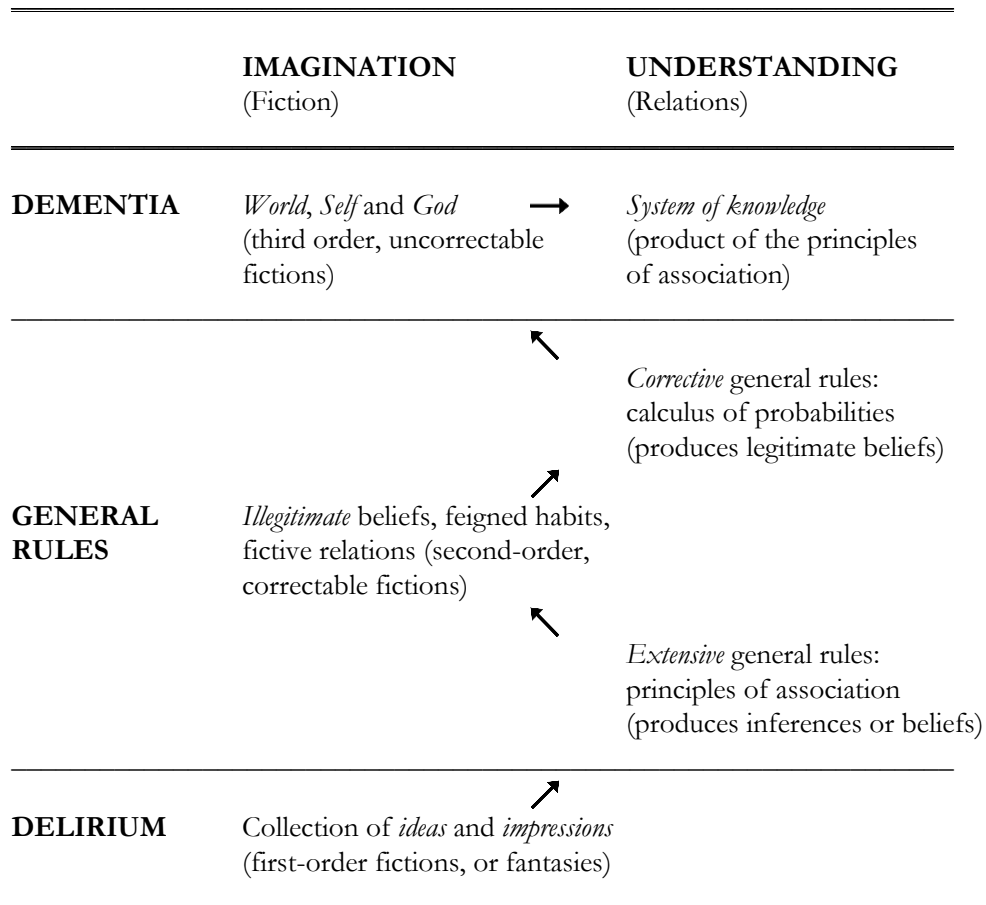
⁴⁹*Treatise*, p. 225.

imagination can itself make use of those same principles to legitimate its own fantasies, and in the denunciation of the illegitimate beliefs that do not obey the productive rules of the understanding (corrective general rules, or the calculus of probabilities). In the third act, finally, the illegitimate beliefs of World, God, and Self, become the horizon of all possible legitimate beliefs, fiction becomes a principle. Yet it was necessary, says Hume, to attain these extreme points of delirium and dementia in order to recognize the vitality of *common sense*, and to recognize that there is neither science nor life except in the middle and temperate regions of general rules and belief.⁵¹ The following diagram summarizes this drama:

⁵⁰*Treatise*, p. 268.

⁵¹Cf. *Enquiries*, p. 155n: The arguments of skepticism “*admit of no answer and produce no conviction*. Their only effect is to cause momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion.”

The Conflict of the Faculties in Hume



PART TWO: THE SYSTEM OF THE PASSIONS

7. The Priority of the Passions. With this all too brief summary of the system of the understanding, we turn to what in fact is the primary interest of Hume himself, namely, the system of the passions.⁵² For if the enquiry into the understanding results in skepticism, if it leads to an inextricable mixture of fiction and human nature, it is because it represents only one part of the enquiry, and not even its principal part. In Hume's philosophy, association finds its meaning only in relation to the passions: *the principles of the passions have an absolute priority over the principles of association.*⁵³ Association is the necessary condition for relations, but it can never give them a sufficient reason. The principles of association can explain the form of thought *in general*, but not its singular contents; it cannot explain the difference of one mind from another, nor can it explain why, in a particular mind, at a particular moment, *this* idea is evoked rather than another. Association may be necessary to give an account of relations in general, but it can never explain any relation in particular.

For Hume, the particularity of relations, the *principium individuationis* of subjects, can only be found in the system of the passions: what gives relation its sufficient reason is the affect of circumstance, which is the variable that defines our passions. Every relation is ultimately dependent upon "that *particular circumstance*, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think it proper to compare them."⁵⁴ In Hume's philosophy, there are ideas (atomism); and then there are the relations between these ideas, relations which may vary without the ideas themselves varying (associationism); and finally there are the circumstances that make these relations vary (passions). The modes of association can determine possible reciprocal relations between ideas—for example, Paul is my brother, I am the brother of Paul. But being exterior to their terms, relations themselves cannot determine which of the two terms has priority over the other. This is the role of passion: it realizes these relations in practice and renders them univocal by assigning a priority to one of the terms, thereby giving a *propensity* or inclination to the imagination. "If a person be my brother I am his likewise: But tho' the relations be reciprocal, they have very different effects upon the

⁵²I am indebted in what follows to Páll S. Ardal's *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), one of the few concentrated studies of Hume's theory of the passions.

⁵³*Treatise*, p. 415: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."

⁵⁴*Treatise*, p. 13 (emphasis added).

imagination.”⁵⁵ In this case, the *self*, as the object of the passion, restrains or restricts the scope of the mind by fixing it on privileged ideas and objects: I easily pass from my brother to myself, from the far to the near, but not from the near to the far, from myself to others.⁵⁶ Association determines *possible* relations, but the passions have the effect of assigning a *real* direction to these relations as a function of circumstance. The system of the understanding and the system of the passions thus reinforce and complete each other in Hume’s philosophy.

The source of these propensities, the motivating force of our passions, is the experience of pleasure or pain, which are irreducible affective impressions that “arise from the application of objects to our bodies.”⁵⁷ Just as ideas and impressions are connected to each other with regularity under the effect of the principles of association, likewise the fact that pleasure is a good and pain is an evil, that we tend toward pleasure and tend to avoid painful impressions—this is something that is not contained in the pleasure and pain themselves, but is the effect of the operation of principles (hence Freud’s later coinage of “the pleasure *principle*”).⁵⁸ Hume defines action as the organization of means in order to attain an end, and in making pleasure our most general end, the principles of passion give action its principle, making the perspective of pleasure the motive of our action.⁵⁹ Book Two of the *Treatise* explores the permutations of this principle: we have *direct* passions when the pleasure and pain from which they proceed have determinate modes of existence: when pleasure and pain are certain, joy or sadness; when they are uncertain, hope or fear; when they are only contemplated, desire or aversion; when they depend on us, will. And we have *indirect* passions when the emotion produces the idea of an object: when the agreeable or disagreeable emotion produces the idea of the self, pride and humility; and when it produces the idea of another person, love and

⁵⁵*Treatise*, p. 340.

⁵⁶In general, says Hume, the propensity of the imagination is to pass from what is distant to what is close (“men are principally concerned about those objects, which are not much removed either in space or time”) (p. 428); from the past to the future (“we advance rather than retard our existence”) (p. 432); and from what is obscure to what is lively (p. 339).

⁵⁷*Treatise*, p. 192. Cf. p. 574: “The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are removed, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition.” Cf. Kemp Smith, pp. 162-164.

⁵⁸*Enquiries*, p. 293: “If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object.”

⁵⁹*Treatise*, p. 414: “When we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry’d to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction.”

hate.⁶⁰

8. The Role of the Passions in Taste (the second and third moments in Hume's definition of taste). We are now able to identify the second moment of Hume's theory of taste, which is derived from this principle of pleasure and pain. Beauty, according to Hume, is a direct passion, because it is derived directly from the feeling of pleasure, though its effect tends to be less violent than those of the other direct passions, since it arises from a reflective *contemplation* of the fitness, correctness, or rightness of actions, compositions, and external forms.⁶¹ Pleasure, says Hume, is the "essence" of beauty: "Beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul."⁶² In the system of the understanding, the formal conditions of taste lie in the principles of atomism and associationism, the ability to perceive elements and their relations. This is completed in the system of the passions, in which "the mind is not content with merely surveying its objects, as they stand in themselves: It also feels a sentiment of approbation or blame, consequent to that survey; and this sentiment determines it to affix the epithet *beautiful or deformed*."⁶³

Two formal conditions must thus be met in order for an object to be judged beautiful. In the system of the understanding, the mind must be able to perceive the minute elements and relations by which the whole object is composed; in the system of the passions, this perception must be accompanied by an impression of pleasure or satisfaction in the judge. The "sound state of the organ" of taste depends on these two conditions; the lack of one or both of them constitutes a "defect or imperfection in the organ."⁶⁴ For this reason, says Hume, aesthetic sentiments depend on

⁶⁰The direct passions are treated in Book 2, Part 3, the indirect passions in Book 2, Parts 1 and 2. Such passions are "indirect" because they proceed from pleasure and pain "but by the conjunction of other qualities": a relation of an idea must be joined to a relation of impressions. For this reason, the principles of indirect passion can only produce their effect by being secondary to the principles of association, or at least by contiguity or causality (cf. *Treatise*, p. 304, where Hume notes that resemblance is "seldom a foundation of either pride or humility").

⁶¹"Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays*, p. 244: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which *contemplates* them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." Hume notes that this division into calm and violent impressions (active and contemplative) is an inexact or fuzzy distinction, since, as we shall see below with regard to tragedy, the contemplation of "the rapture of poetry and music" can often produce a violent passion: cf. *Treatise*, p. 276.

⁶²*Treatise*, p. 299.

⁶³"The Sceptic," in *Essays*, p. 164.

⁶⁴"Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays*, p. 246. In these cases, either the organ is not exact enough

“the particular fabric or structure of the mind, which enables such particular forms to operate in such a particular manner, and produces a sympathy or conformity between the mind and its objects.”⁶⁵ Beauty is the concurrence of a perception of minute qualities in an object and the sensation of a pleasurable impression in the subject. The aesthetic sentiment of beauty (by a “true judge” with a “sound organ”) thus lies at the nexus of two sets of principles: the principles of association (“the order and construction of parts...”) and the principles of passion (“...such as give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul”).⁶⁶

Yet this twofold definition of taste, as we have seen, is asymmetrical: the understanding, says Hume, is “not an *essential* part of taste.”⁶⁷ Whereas it is the duty of the understanding to determine the *parts* of Nature (atomism) and to establish relations between these parts (associationism), it is the nature of taste, at least in principle, to react to *wholes*, to totalities. “From circumstances and relations, known or supposed, *reason* leads us to the discovery of the concealed and unknown: after all circumstances and relations have been laid before us, *taste* makes us feel from the *whole* a new sentiment of blame and approbation.”⁶⁸ According to Hume, *both morality and criticism belong to this domain of taste*: they are matters of sentiment (taste), and not matters of fact or relation (reason). This then is the third moment in Hume’s definition of taste: the sentiment that makes us commend or condemn a work of art as beautiful or deformed (in criticism), or a character as good or evil (in morality), must be produced by a consideration of the character or work *in general*.

The understanding, to be sure, can influence criticism by informing us of the “mutual relation and correspondence of parts” in a work, just as it can influence morality by informing us of the object of a passion, or the means by which an passion can be satisfied.⁶⁹ But it can never determine the resulting sentiment, precisely because “no sentiment represents what is really in the

so as “to perceive every ingredient in the composition,” or it is not fine enough to be affected by the perception of these ingredients with “a sensible delight or uneasiness” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” p. 247). Conversely, the judgment “x is beautiful” cannot be reduced to either “x gives me pleasure” or “x possess such-and-such elements and relations (qualities),” for I can perceive the qualities of an object without them giving me pleasure, and I can be pleased by a work without being capable of discerning its constituent elements.

⁶⁵“The Sceptic,” in *Essays*, pp. 164-165.

⁶⁶*Treatise*, p. 299.

⁶⁷“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 249.

⁶⁸*Enquiries*, p. 294.

⁶⁹*Treatise*, p. 459. Thus, “the anatomist is admirably fitted to give advice to the painter...[for] we must have an exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connection, before we can design with

object...One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty.”⁷⁰ As an object of the understanding, for instance, the circle is a determinate *relation* between parts (parts that are equidistant from a center point); but as the object of an aesthetic sentiment, its beauty lies “not in any of the parts or members, but results from the whole....It is only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind.”⁷¹ The same dichotomy is evident in morality. Hume asks, Is it the same thing, morally speaking, to do evil to someone who has done me good, or to do good toward someone who has done me evil? To recognize that it is *not* the same thing morally, even though the *relation* is the same (contrariety), is to perceive the difference between morality and reason.⁷²

It is this domain of taste and sentiment that Hume explores in Book Three of the *Treatise* (with regard to morality), and in the essay “Of the Standard of Taste” (with regard to criticism). We will treat each of the realms in turn, since the establishment of the moral world is a prolegomena to the critical task. But in both realms, Hume poses the problem in the same terms: why is it that a work, character, or action, “upon the general view of survey, gives a certain satisfaction or uneasiness?”⁷³ Put differently, if the passions have the effect of *limiting* the scope of the mind by fixing it on privileged ideas and objects as a function of circumstance and interest, what is it that can make us abandon (without inference) our own point of view and circumstances so as to consider a character or work “in *general*”?⁷⁴

any elegance or correctness” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 240).

⁷⁰“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 230.

⁷¹*Enquiries*, p. 292.

⁷²*Enquiries*, pp. 287-288: “You can never rest the morality on the relation, but must have recourse to the decisions of sentiment.” This passage summarizes the argument of *Treatise*, III, I, 1. On the limited role of reason in morality, see also *Treatise*, p. 459, and the examples of Oedipus and Nero in *Enquiries*, p. 290.

⁷³*Treatise*, p. 475.

⁷⁴“I have executed a great part of my design,” Hume says, “by a state of the question” (*Treatise*, p. 476). In parallel texts, Hume poses the moral and aesthetic question in almost identical terms. For morality: “Tis only when a character is considered *in general*, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil” (*Treatise*, p. 472). For aesthetics: “When any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man *in general*, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 239).

A. THE MORAL WORLD (Culture)

9. Sympathy and Partiality. We turn first to the realm of morality, where Hume's initial answer to this question is well known—it is *sympathy*, which is a disposition that naturally extends our interest beyond ourselves.⁷⁵ As Kemp Smith has shown, belief and sympathy are analogous doctrines in Hume: just as belief is a propensity of the imagination to unite certain ideas and impressions in the mind, so sympathy is a principle of communication that allows the passions of one person to be transferred to another “by the force of imagination.”⁷⁶ To say that humans are essentially egoistic (what Hume calls the “selfish hypothesis”) is far too facile a conclusion, for a difference nonetheless subsists between the egoist who finds his pleasure in himself, and one who finds an egoistic pleasure in the satisfaction of others.⁷⁷ For Hume, it is simply a *fact* that sympathy exists, that humans have a natural generosity toward others.⁷⁸

It is also a fact, however, that this generosity is naturally limited. To be moral, sympathy must not be limited to the present moment, but must be extended into the future; it must not be limited simply to the present sensation of another's passions, but be extended into what he calls a “double” sympathy, that is, a desire for the other's happiness and an aversion to their misery.⁷⁹ But it is impossible to double sympathy, to extend it to the future, “without being aided by some *circumstance* in the present, which strikes upon us in a lively manner,”⁸⁰ and this circumstance is, precisely enough, determined by the modes of association: our first sympathetic passions are for our parents and relatives (“a species of causality”), those near to us (contiguity), and those like ourselves

⁷⁵*Treatise*, p. 216: “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.” Hume calls sympathy “the extensive capacity of the human species” (*Enquiries*, p. 177).

⁷⁶*Treatise*, p. 427. This is one of the essential theses of Norman Kemp Smith's *The Philosophy of David Hume* (see esp. pp. 170, 174-177). Belief is not itself an impression or idea, and sympathy is not itself a passion or emotion: both terms describe the manner (the “liveliness” or “vivacity”) by which an idea or passion comes to be experienced by the subject.

⁷⁷*Enquiries*, Appendix 2, esp. pp. 297-298. Cf. *Treatise*, pp. 486-487: “I am of the opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish.”

⁷⁸*Enquiries*, p. 298n: “I assume it [sympathy] as real, from general experience, without any other proof.”

⁷⁹*Treatise*, p. 381-389.

⁸⁰*Treatise*, p. 386.

(resemblance).⁸¹ Family, neighbors, friends—these are the natural determinations of sympathy, and the stronger the relation, the stronger the sympathy.⁸² (Even in the state of nature, which Hume admits as a useful philosophical fiction, the family appears as a type of natural institution, derived from the sexual instinct and the sympathy of the parents for each other and for their progeny.)⁸³ Sympathy can attain a certain moral generality naturally, but only under the paradoxical condition of circumstances that at the same time *limit* its extension—by itself, passion allows what is farthest to escape from it.

As a function of this paradoxical status of sympathy, Hume attempts to determine what in morality refers to nature and what does not. Natural sympathy is the *necessary* condition and the sole means to morality (there *is* a moral instinct in Hume) but it cannot give morality a *sufficient* reality, on the contrary. Morality is a demand of nature, but one that nature itself cannot satisfy; on the contrary it destroys it. For how does the moral world affirm its reality? The fact of morality is justice, that is, the invariable character of esteem or impartiality. The moral world is affirmed when “sympathy varies without a variation in our esteem,”⁸⁴ when we give to the same moral qualities the same approbation, whether these qualities appear in China or England, whether they belong to our friends

⁸¹On the application of the principles of association to the notion of sympathy, see *Treatise*, p. 318, 483-484: “A man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where everything else is equal. Hence arise our common measures of duty, in preferring the one to the other.”

⁸²*Treatise*, p. 318: “The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception.”

⁸³See *Enquiries*, p. 190; *Treatise*, p. 486-87, 602; *Essays*, p. 131: “Nature has implanted in all living creatures an affection between the sexes, which, even in the fiercest and most rapacious animals, is not merely confined to the satisfaction of the bodily appetite, but begets a friendship and mutual sympathy, which runs through the whole tenor of their lives.”

⁸⁴*Treatise*, p. 581. This uniformity of esteem is not the result of an imaginary voyage by an ideal “impartial spectator”: the moral problem consists of passing from *real* sympathies that exclude each other to a *real* totality that includes those same sympathies by extending them beyond their natural exercise. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), defines utilitarian ethics in terms of the position of an “impartial sympathetic spectator” (“Something is right, a social system say, when an ideally rational and impartial spectator would approve of it from a general point of view should he possess all the relevant knowledge of the circumstances” [p. 184]). This notion is primarily derived from Adam Smith and, as Rawls himself hints, has little to do with Hume’s position. Nor, as ethnology has taught us, is the distance secured by the externality of an outside or “impartial” observer necessarily a virtue in interpreting cultures. Cf. *Enquiries*, p. 217: “It is not conceivable, how a *real* sentiment or passion can ever arise from a known *imaginary* interest.”

or our enemies.⁸⁵ Esteem is the integral of the sympathies, the foundation of justice. In this sense, justice is a scheme or system, a norm. But at the other pole, what is the fact of the natural sympathies? It is *partiality*; to the point that we “regard any remarkable transgression of such a degree of partiality, either by too great an enlargement, or contraction of the affection, as vicious and immoral.”⁸⁶ We condemn those who prefer strangers to their own children (too great an enlargement) as well as those who center all their attention exclusively on their family (too great a contraction). Because the essence of particular interest is not egoism but partiality, sympathy can never get beyond its particular interest: “Our sense of duty always follows the common and natural course of our passions.”⁸⁷ The primary obstacle to the formation of human society and morality lies in *the partial nature of sympathy*. Our natural benevolence is biased, since no one has the same sympathies as another, the same family, friends, and neighbors, and the plurality of partialities thus defined is, precisely, contradiction, violence, and cruelty.

10. The Invention of Artifice. This emphasis on partiality, rather than egoism, is one of Hume’s most simple but most important ideas. Egoisms and their corresponding natural rights only need to be limited for society to be possible, and it is in this sense that the contract theories of the 16th to 18th centuries posed the social problem as a limitation or even renunciation of natural rights.⁸⁸ But when Hume says that humans are not naturally egoistic, but rather that they are naturally partial, he is proposing a fundamental change in the practical position of the moral and social problem. The problem is no longer: How to limit egoisms and their corresponding natural rights? but rather: How to go “beyond” the natural partialities of sympathy, how to pass from a “limited generosity” to an “extensive sympathy,”⁸⁹ in short, how to extend the passions, how to give them a further *extension* they do not have in themselves? Egoisms and their corresponding natural rights only need to be *limited* for society to be possible, whereas sympathies need to be *integrated* or synthesized into a positive totality.⁹⁰ Hume does not think of society as a system of legal and contractual

⁸⁵*Treatise*, p. 581.

⁸⁶*Treatise*, p. 488.

⁸⁷*Treatise*, p. 484.

⁸⁸On the history of the natural rights tradition, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

⁸⁹*Treatise*, p. 586.

⁹⁰For Hume’s critique of the social contract, see *Treatise*, pp. 547-551; and “Of the Original Contract,” in *Essays*, 465-487. For Hume, the fundamental difference between the contract and utility

limitations, but as a positive institutional invention: how to *invent artifices*, how to create artificial institutions that force the passions to go beyond their partiality and form moral, juridical, political, and aesthetic sentiments?⁹¹

The problem of human nature now finds itself displaced in Hume's philosophy. It is no longer a matter, as in the understanding, of the complex relation between fiction and human nature, but between human nature and artifice (humans, says Hume, are an "inventive species").⁹² In the understanding, the problem is to determine the *parts* of nature, as the object of physics, and to institute rules of extension (inferences) that establish relations between these parts. In the passions, on the contrary, the elements of morality (relations and circumstances) are immediately given, as the object of history, in the form of *partialities*, and the problem is to invent artificial extensions that go beyond the partiality of human nature. It is no longer a matter of making inferences from *extensive* parts, but of constructing totalities from mutually *exclusive* partialities. All the elements of morality (partial sympathies) are given naturally, but in themselves they are powerless to construct a moral world. The moral and social problem consists in passing from these real sympathies that exclude each other to a real totality that includes these same sympathies. Such a totality, however, cannot be obtained naturally since its fundamental elements exclude each other; it must therefore be invented or constructed artificially (though Hume also insists that it is "natural" to construct such artifices).

How exactly are such totalities to be constructed? Morality is not a principle of nature, says Hume, but rather a schema or system that is constituted by *general rules*: "If we consider the ordinary course of human actions, we shall find, that the mind restrains not itself by any general and universal rules; but acts on most occasions as it is determin'd by its present motives and inclination....[But] on some occasions we extend our motives beyond those very circumstances, which gave rise to them,

lies in the fact that the former is juridical, while the latter is institutional. The institution is not a negative limitation *of* action, like the law, but a positive model *for* action, an invented and oblique system of indirect means. The law thus *presupposes* an institution that it limits, and the obligation produced by the law thereby *presupposes* a utility. It is this argument that lies at the basis of Hume's theory of the promise, in *Treatise*, Book 3, Section: "A promise wou'd not be intelligible, before human conventions had established it....A sense of duty presupposes an antecedent obligation" (pp. 517, 519).

⁹¹*Treatise*, p. 489: "The remedy [for partiality] is not deriv'd from nature, but from artifice." The term "institution" (Hume also calls them "human conventions" [e.g., p. 542]) is used in a broad and general sense that includes not only governmental institutions, but social institutions (marriage, property), natural institutions (the family), and the even more subterranean institutions of taste and fashion.

and form something like *general rules* for our conduct.”⁹³ Book Three of the *Treatise* completes the theory of general rules that Hume began in Book One: *to the extensive and corrective rules of the understanding are now added the extensive and corrective rules of the passions*. The function of the general rules of passion is to determine a stable and common point of view beyond particular sympathies, a firm and calm criteria, independent of our present situation: the rule *corrects* our sentiments by making us forget our present situation;⁹⁴ and at the same time, the general rule is *extensive*, it “reaches beyond those instances from which it first arose.”⁹⁵ Through the rule, the particular sympathies of each person, and their corresponding partialities, are surmounted: my sympathies are artificially exercised outside of their natural limits. Morality is a scheme or system that can be thought of either as a whole in relation to parts, or a means in relation to ends: it is the construction of an artificial totality that integrates mutually exclusive partialities, and the constitution of an invented system of means (general interest) that permits particular interests to be satisfied and realized without violence or contradiction. In this way Hume merges the moral problem with the political problem: Hume the moralist is necessarily a political economist.

Hume’s theory of artifice proposes a complex conception of the relation of nature and culture, of passions and general rules. Hume describes this relation in terms of *utility*, which he defines simply as “a tendency to a certain end.”⁹⁶ Nature cannot arrive at its ends except through the indirect and oblique means of artificial cultural institutions—what Hume calls a general rule is an institution. As Bentham will later say, needs are natural, and nature demands that they be satisfied, but there is no satisfaction of needs (or at least constancy or duration to this satisfaction) except one that is artificial and social.⁹⁷ What general rules give to natural passion and sympathy is an extension in which they can be exercised and deployed *naturally*, but now liberated from their natural limits. The passions are not limited by institutions, but extended; instincts are not repressed by society, but enlarged.

⁹²*Treatise*, p. 484.

⁹³*Treatise*, p. 362.

⁹⁴*Treatise*, p. 582: “Experience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments, or at least, of correcting our language, where the sentiments are more stubborn and inalterable.”

⁹⁵*Treatise*, p. 499.

⁹⁶*Enquiries*, p. 286; cf. p. 219.

⁹⁷*Treatise*, pp. 484-485. Cf. p. 521: General rules “give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner, than by their headlong and impetuous motion.” On Bantham, see Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*,

And yet this is not to say that society is *explained* by utility, or the institution, by the propensity or need. It is true that needs are satisfied in institutions, that institutions are models *for* action and the possible satisfaction of passions: sexuality is satisfied in the institution of marriage, avidity and selfishness are satisfied in the institution of property. But institutions satisfy needs only by constraining them at the same time: here is one form of marriage, one regime of property, but others are possible, and can be found in other epochs, other countries. Such is the difference between passion and institution: there is an institution when the means by which an instinct is satisfied are not determined by the instinct itself.⁹⁸ The propensity is general, but it does not explain the particular institution, even when it finds the form of its own satisfaction in this particular.⁹⁹ What then explains the particular character of the institution, the general rule, if not utility?

11. The General Rule as a Passion of the Imagination. On this point, Hume is explicit. What explains the rule is the formative power of the imagination: “I suspect that these rules are principally fix’d by the imagination, or the more *frivolous* properties of our thought and imagination.”¹⁰⁰ The passions, in other words, have a twofold effect on the imagination. We have already seen what we might call the *simple* effect of the passions on the imagination: to the degree that the real passions affect the mind and fix it, to the degree that they assign a real direction to the relations of association, the imagination ceases to be a fantasy and becomes a human nature. But the general rule is the result of a *complex* effect. The imagination is not only affected by the passions; it also *reflects* the passions that fix it, thereby recovering fantasy at a new level.¹⁰¹ Hume here appeals to a potent metaphor: with regard to the passions, he says, the imagination does not merely behave in the manner of a wind instrument, which “immediately loses the sound after the breath ceases,” but in the manner of a string instrument, “where after each stroke the vibrations still retain some sound,

trans. Mary Morris (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 17-18.

⁹⁸Cf. *Enquiries*, p. 161: “All birds of the same species in every age and country build their nests alike: in this we see the force of *instinct*. Men, in different times and places, frame their houses differently: Here we perceive the influence of reason and *custom*. A like inference may be drawn from comparing the instinct of generation and the institution of property.”

⁹⁹Utility cannot explain the institution: neither private utility, since the institution constrains it, nor public utility, since it is too remote, and already presupposes “a whole plan or scheme,” an entire institutional world that it cannot create, and to which it “is only connected” (*Treatise*, p. 480-481).

¹⁰⁰*Treatise*, p. 508n.

¹⁰¹*Treatise*, p. 358: “Every thing, which is agreeable to the senses, is also in some measure agreeable to the fancy, and conveys to the thought an *image* of that satisfaction.”

which gradually and insensibly decays.”¹⁰² The imagination retains the passions that fix it, it makes them resonate in the mind. And on one point at least, one must correct the metaphor of the wind instrument, for in resonating in the mind, the passions are not content to gradually become less lively and actual; in fact, says Hume, they *change their quality*, and acquire a new timbre or tone.

Hume develops this thesis at several points, but never more precisely than in his theory of *tragedy*.¹⁰³ It is the business of poetry, he says, “to bring every affection near to us by lively imagery and representation,”¹⁰⁴ and these affections, in turn, are accompanied in us by a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness: “Every movement of the theatre, by a skilful poet, is communicated, as it were by magic, to the spectators; who weep, tremble, resent, rejoice, and are inflamed with all the variety of passions.”¹⁰⁵ This is the simple effect of the passions on the imagination. But tragedy presents an instance of the complex effect that cannot be accounted for merely by the principle of sympathy. For when the tragic poet puts the dark and disagreeable passions of sorrow, terror, and anxiety on the stage, the spectacle of these horrors *pleases* the audience; they are saddened, terrified, and angered, and yet “the more they are touched and affected, the more they are delighted.”¹⁰⁶ How is this possible? Fontanelle explained this phenomena by arguing that, in recognizing that the passions on the tragic stage are merely imaginary and fictive, our sorrow is muted, and this produces an agreeable sentiment in us.¹⁰⁷ But this is only the negative half of the solution; the positive half lies elsewhere. What counts, says Hume, is not simply that the passion is only imagined; it is that the imagination itself becomes *impassioned*, in a way that is proper

¹⁰²*Treatise*, p. 440.

¹⁰³See *Treatise*, p. 585. “A fertile soil, and a happy climate, delight us by a *reflexion* on the happiness which they wou’d afford the inhabitants tho’ at present the country be desart and uninhabited.” Or again: “A man, whose limbs and shape promise strength and activity, is esteem’d handsome, tho’ condemn’d to perpetual imprisonment.” Such a man is an object of an aesthetic judgment, not only because his body is separated from its actual exercise and only imagined, but because the imagination is impassioned by the features of his body. “Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them controul our passions,” writes Hume, “but they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste” (p. 586). Thus taste is a sentiment, not of the heart (sympathy) but of the imagination (general rule).

¹⁰⁴*Enquiry*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁰⁵*Enquiry*, pp. 221-223.

¹⁰⁶“Of Tragedy,” in *Essays*, p. 216.

¹⁰⁷“Of Tragedy,” in *Essays*, p. 218-219 [quoting Fontanelle]: “We weep for the misfortune of a hero, to whom we are attached. In the same instant, we comfort ourselves, by reflecting, that it is nothing but fiction: And it is precisely that mixture of sentiments, which composes an agreeable sorrow, and tears that delight us.”

to it. In tragedy, *the imagination dominates the passions, rather than having the passions dominate the imagination*. Where the latter is the case, we can never rise above the sympathetic state of the passions; but in the former case, “the subordinate movement of the imagination is converted into the predominant, and gives force to it, though of a different, and even sometimes though of a contrary nature.”¹⁰⁸ There is aesthetics when the movement of the imagination prevails over that of the passion, and dominates it. And in being reflected in the imagination, the passion changes its quality, so that the pain of a disagreeable passion can be connected to the pleasure of an almost infinite play of the imagination.

Tragedy is but a single instance of this complex effect (reflection) that the passions have on the imagination. In general, Hume argues, the condition that makes this type of reflection possible is *the distinction between a power and its actual exercise*: “The distinction which we sometimes make between a *power* and the *exercise* of it, is entirely frivolous, and neither man nor any other being ought ever to be thought possess of any ability, unless it be exerted and put in action. But tho’ this be strictly true in a just and *philosophical* way of thinking, ‘tis certain it is not the philosophy of our *passions*; but that many things operate upon them by means of the idea and supposition of power, independent of its actual exercise.”¹⁰⁹ In being reflected in the imagination, the passion loses something; or at least there is something in the passion that does not allow itself to be reflected. What cannot be reflected, by definition, is the *present exercise* of the passion. To the degree that passion is reflected, it must necessarily be reflected in fantasy, for the imagination cannot reflect what defines the *real* operation of the affections, the action by which they fix the mind in this or that form.

But the passion also gains something: in reflecting the forms of its own fixation in fantasy, the imagination liberates the passions from their natural partiality. Through this operation of reflection, general rules “give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner, than by their headlong and impetuous motion.”¹¹⁰ The reflection of the passion *in* the imagination is at the same time the extension of the passion *by* the imagination—the rule thereby becomes possible. *The real definition of the general rule is: a*

¹⁰⁸“Of Tragedy,” in *Essays*, p. 223. “Of Tragedy” is dominated by this energetic language of conversion and transformation: “the whole impulse of those passions is *converted* into pleasure, and swells the delight....The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives *a new direction* from the sentiment of beauty. The latter, being the dominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and *convert* the former into themselves....The affection, rousing the mind, excites a large stock of spirit and vehemence; which is all *transformed* into pleasure” (p. 220).

¹⁰⁹*Treatise*, pp. 311-312.

¹¹⁰*Treatise*, p. 521.

passion of the imagination.¹¹¹ When the passions are imagined, the imagination is impassioned, acquiring a whole new “set of passions belonging to *it*” (general rules of passion). These passions “are mov’d by degrees of liveliness and strength that are inferior to belief, and independent of the real existence of objects.”¹¹² The inferiority of the degree of belief is the condition of another type of belief (artifice has its own mode of belief).

The power of the imagination, in short, is the imagination of a power (apart from its actual exercise). But this separation of a passion from its actual exercise is indefensible from the point of view of the understanding. It is an illusion of the imagination. More precisely, it is the illusion of Art, or the world of culture (artifice). The “frivolous” illusion of the imagination is at the same time the serious reality of culture. It is here that fantasy or fiction takes on a new meaning in Hume’s philosophy. The general rules of the understanding and the passions are both grounded in the imagination, and in both cases, fantasy lies at the foundation of a World: the world of continuous and distinct existence, and the world of culture. In the understanding, extensive rules come to contradict the principles of association, and corrective rules of philosophic probability are applied in order to denounce their fiction; but the notion of the external World finally appears as a residue of this fiction that, from the point of view of principles, cannot be corrected. The general rules of passion also constitute a fictive world, but this world *conforms* to the principles of passion, merely contradicting the limitative character of their effect. If the reality of culture is an illusion from the point of view of the understanding, it is nonetheless affirmed in a domain where *the understanding cannot and must not dissipate the illusion*: in the realm of the passions, the illusion is no less real than the understanding that denounces it. If the enquiry into the understanding leads to an impasse between belief according to causality and belief in the continuous and distinct existence of the World (even though they are contradictory from the point of view of the principles of association), it is because these principles themselves do not hold the secret of human nature: association, for Hume, is always *for* passion, it is always subordinated to the needs of practical life.

The distinction between the simple effect and the complex effect of the passions on the imagination is exactly the distinction between nature and culture. If Hume manifests a constant interest in animal psychology throughout the *Treatise*, it is perhaps because the animal is a nature

¹¹¹*Treatise*, p. 587: “The imagination adheres to the *general* view of things.”

¹¹²*Treatise*, p. 585.

without culture: principles act on its mind, but they have no other effect than the simple effect.¹¹³ Lacking general rules, permanent fantasy, and reflective procedures, animals have neither culture nor history. Humans, however, have liberated the formative power of their imagination, they have placed their passions in a direct and immediate relation with the imagination. It is the imagination that reflects passion, and in being reflected, passion or sympathy finds itself before an enlarged reproduction of itself, it sees itself liberated from the limits and conditions of its actual exercise, it watches itself open onto a whole artificial domain, the world of culture, where it can be projected in a fantastic image and be deployed without limits. It is this reflected image (the general rule) that allows the passions go beyond their partiality, and receive a vivacity that is proper to them. The relation between nature and culture in Hume is not the relation of natural rights to the law that limits them (a law that would be allegedly entered into by mutual agreement and voluntary consent), but the relation of passions and instincts to the institutions that extend them (institutions that are founded upon utility, even if they are established through force and violence).¹¹⁴ General rules are passions reflected in the imagination, which become the passions of the imagination.

12. The General Rules of Culture: Justice, Government, and Commerce. We have seen *how* the general rule is possible; we must now explain *what* they are by giving a summary exposition of Hume's theory of actual social rules or moral categories. In the *Treatise*, Hume discusses the rules of justice ("the stability of possession") and politics ("allegiance to government"), and this is complemented, in the *Essays*, by the formulation of general rules concerning economics ("the prosperity of commerce"). The social world is *constituted* by these three sets of moral, political, and economic rules, and we will see how and why they constitute the condition of possibility of a standard of taste.

a. JUSTICE. The first and most famous of these sets of general rules is centered on the question of justice, which Hume understands primarily as "a regard to the property of others."¹¹⁵ It is *possession* that defines what Rawls calls the "circumstances of justice," that is, the empirical conditions that give rise to the virtue of justice, and without which justice would neither be required,

¹¹³For Hume discussions of animal psychology, see *Treatise*, pp. 176-179, 324-328, 397-398.

¹¹⁴"Of the Original Contract," in *Essays*, p. 471.

¹¹⁵"Of the Original Contract," in *Essays*, p. 480.

nor, for that matter, even possible.¹¹⁶ These circumstances are of two kinds: (1) objectively and materially, they depend on “the *situation* of external objects,” that is, the moderate scarcity of external goods, and the ease with which such resources can be made to change hands; (2) subjectively and formally, these circumstances are derived from “the concurrence of certain *qualities* of the human mind,” on the one hand, my natural attachment to, or selfish interest in, those resources of which I have an immediate possession, and on the other, my limited generosity that impels me to share these resources, if ever, only with those to whom I have a sympathetic relationship.¹¹⁷

Remove either of these conditions, and the virtue of justice would be nugatory; there simply would be no occasion for its exercise, “just as in the absence of threats of injury to life and limb there would be no occasion for physical courage.”¹¹⁸ Under other conditions, not only would justice not exist, but other correlative types of virtue (fraternity, generosity, benevolence, etc.) would be produced and required: “Encrease to a sufficient degree the benevolence of men, or the bounty of nature, and you render justice useless, by supplying in its place with *much nobler virtues*, and *more valuable blessings*.”¹¹⁹ We need not have recourse to utopias or poetic fictions of a “golden age” to identify such alternate circumstances. “The case of families approaches towards it,” says Hume, and it is not difficult to imagine a continuum of other human associations likewise characterized by more or less clearly defined common identities and shared purposes.¹²⁰

The cooperative venture of society is necessary only when the property and interests of these sympathetic associations come into conflict. A rule must be established that gives a fixity to possessions: it is in this movement that present possession becomes *property*, according to the establishment of a general rule concerning the *stability of possession*.¹²¹ This general rule of property is “a convention enter’d into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his

¹¹⁶John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 126-130.

¹¹⁷*Treatise*, pp. 494-495; cf. p. 503: “The chief impediment to the project of society and partnership lies in the avidity and selfishness of the natural temper.”

¹¹⁸Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 128.

¹¹⁹*Treatise*, pp. 494-495 (emphases added); cf. *Enquiries*, 188.

¹²⁰On this point see Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 31, who suggests as examples “tribes, neighborhoods, cities, towns, universities, trade unions, national liberation elements and established nationalisms, and a wide variety of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic communities.” On the family, see *Enquiries*, p. 185. On the fiction of the golden age, see *Treatise*, p. 493; *Enquiries*, pp. 188-189.

¹²¹*Treatise*, p. 497: “Property must be stable, and must be fix’d by general rules.”

fortune and industry.”¹²² The convention of property is the artifice by which the actions of each are related to that of others; it is neither a promise, nor a social contract, but the installation of “a general *scheme* or system.”¹²³ It is only from the point of view of the rule of property that “I observe that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me.”¹²⁴

But being a product of the imagination, this general rule asserting the stability of possession is in itself completely *undetermined*, “loose and uncertain,”¹²⁵ projecting its image in every direction. It gives no indication of *how* stability of possession is to be determined: “Tho’ the establishment of the rule, concerning the stability of possession, be not only useful, but even absolutely necessary to human society, it can never serve to any purpose, while it remains in such general terms....It follows, therefore that the general rule, that possession must be stable, is not apply’d by particular judgments, but by *other general rules*.”¹²⁶ Hume devotes an entire section of the *Treatise* to this second series of rules that determine property—primarily immediate or present possession, and secondarily, occupation, prescription, accession, and succession.¹²⁷ How are *these* rules determined? Hume here shows in detail that it is in the principles of association (causality, contiguity, resemblance) that the passions of possession find the means for determining the possible situations that may arise in the extension of the general rule of possession, which allows it to formulate general rules that constitute the realm of property law. The law is a study in the variations of relations that permits one to respond in each case to the question: Is there, between this person or that object, a relation of such a nature that can make us believe (or make the imagination believe) in an appropriation of the one by the other?

In this regard, the *Treatise* poses a number of familiar yet insolent questions: In order to become the owner of an abandoned city, does one have to touch its gate with one’s hand, or is it enough to throw one’s javelin from a distance? Why are rivers and bays capable of becoming the property of a nation, while the sea is not? Why, according to civil law, is what is above more important than what is underneath, while in other cases the reverse is true (the soil is more

¹²²*Treatise*, p. 489.

¹²³*Treatise*, p. 579; cf. p. 497.

¹²⁴*Treatise*, p. 490.

¹²⁵*Treatise*, p. 502.

¹²⁶*Treatise*, pp. 501-502; cf. 555-556.

¹²⁷*Treatise*, Book III, Section 2, “Of the rules, which determine property,” pp. 501-513. Cf. “Of the

important the surface, but a painting is more important than the canvas upon which it is painted)? If a person makes a cup from the metal of another, or a ship from his wood, and then the proprietor of the metal or wood then demands his goods back, does he acquire title to the cup or ship?¹²⁸ In the determination of the artificial rules governing these cases, the imagination makes use of the principles of association, its norm being easy transition between the related terms. For Hume, the law is completely associationist, it is a geography of relations: what we expect of a judge is to *apply* the association of ideas, to say what the thing in question is in proper relation with (in the mind of an observer “in general”). This why Hume conceives of history as a kind of physics of humanity: the historian studies how general rules are determined in detail, in different places and at different times.¹²⁹

Association finds its true meaning and destiny in this casuistry of relations that determines the detail of the world of culture: relations are the *means* to an activity, a juridical, political, economic, artistic, and even religious practice.¹³⁰ To think of associationism simply as a psychology of the understanding is to miss its primary significance in Hume. The association of ideas does not define a “knowing” subject, but on the contrary a set of possible means through which the “practical” subject can realize its passions, its moral, political, and economic ends. The passions fix the mind by providing it with ends, and association provides the means for attaining these ends. Association is a theory of all that is practical in human life, it is the *means* through which the practical ends, projects, aims, and intentions of human persons are realized and satisfied. “Thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*.”¹³¹

Original Contract,” in *Essays*, p. 482.

¹²⁸For these examples, see *Treatise*, pp. 508n, 511n, 513, 513n.

¹²⁹*Enquiries*, pp. 83-84: “Records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them.”

¹³⁰*Enquiries*, p. 294: “Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the *means* of attaining happiness or avoiding misery.” Cf. *Treatise*, p. 459: “Reason can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.”

¹³¹*Treatise*, p. 621.

Yet even this second series of rules is insufficient to establish justice completely. For in the final analysis, it is still fantasy that makes use of the principles of association to form general rules, which is revealed in the frequent failure of these rules, and the necessity of trials.¹³² Since these determinative rules often “depend very much on chance, they must frequently prove contradictory both to men’s wants and desires; and persons and possessions must often be very ill adjusted.” To avoid the perpetual threat of recourse to violence, the rules of justice must therefore “seek some medium betwixt a rigid stability, and this changeable and uncertain adjustment.”¹³³ The determinations of the rule must be *corrected* and made the object of a second casuistry or a theory of the accidental or the exception.¹³⁴ In short, a third series of rules are required to account for the *movement* of property, and to thereby correct the situations that arise from this inadequation between people and their possible circumstances. These circumstances are, in general, regulated by two rules: the *transference* of property by consent (when the property to which the consent is applied is present or particular), or the performance of *promises* (when the property itself is absent or general).¹³⁵ These two rules form the foundation of the general rule of commerce, namely prosperity, which Hume considers as a necessary complement to the rule of justice.

We have simplified Hume’s complex discussions of justice, but the essential point for our purposes is that the rule of justice is not a single general rule but a complex network of rules in which three simultaneous dimensions must be distinguished: establishment, determination, and correction. Justice is *established* in the general rule affirming the stability of possession; it is *determined* by a second series of general rules that specify criteria allowing us to identify the form this stability takes in actual situations; and, finally, it is *corrected* by a third series of rules that regulate exceptions to the general rule of stability, that provide a means of destabilizing property and effecting its transfer.

b. GOVERNMENT. The second set of general rules Hume considers are those

¹³²Thus, with regard to the example of the city and the javelin, Hume writes, “For my part, I find the dispute impossible to be decided, and that because the whole question hangs upon the fancy, which in this case is not possess’d of any precise or determinate standard (*Treatise*, 508n).

¹³³*Treatise*, p. 514.

¹³⁴Thus, Hume writes that “general rules [i.e., determinative rules] commonly extend beyond the principles, on which they are founded; and that we seldom make any exception to them, unless that exception have the qualities of a general rule [i.e., a corrective rule], and be founded on very numerous and common instances” (*Treatise*, p. 551).

¹³⁵*Treatise*, pp. 519-523.

concerning the order of government and the theory of the State, whose primary purpose is to support the rules of justice. For there is a lack to these cultural formations. They extend the passions beyond their partiality, but *what the passions gain in extension they lose in vivacity*. In order for the passions to really go beyond their natural partiality, it is not enough for them to be extended artificially; in this extension, the passion (again, in an artificial manner) must conserve its natural vigor and vivacity. Given our propensity to prefer the contiguous to the remote, our circumstances must be modified in such a way that the observance of the laws of justice will be in our immediate interest: in an artificial manner, what is closest (natural sympathies, particular interest) must become the most remote, and what is most remote (artificial general rules, general interest) become the closest.¹³⁶ If the rules of justice address themselves primarily to the “objective” circumstances of justice (the scarcity and mobility of possessions), the rules of government address themselves primarily to the “subjective” circumstances (avidity and self-interest). This problem finds its most general solution in the various instances of social power (principally the *State*, but also education, custom, and so on),¹³⁷ and their apparatuses of sanction, reward, and punishment, which confer on the enlarged sentiments a supplementary degree of vivacity and belief they lack in themselves. “Obedience is a new duty that must be invented to support that of justice.”¹³⁸ *Allegiance to government* is thus established as a second general rule that supports, and even administers, the rules of justice, particularly those concerning the performance of promises.¹³⁹

But again, this the general rule demanding allegiance to government is in itself undetermined: “The *general* obligation, which binds us to government, is the interest and necessities of society, and this obligation is very strong. The *determination* of it to this or that particular prince or form of government is frequently more uncertain and dubious.”¹⁴⁰ In short, *to whom* is this allegiance

¹³⁶*Treatise*, p. 537: “This then is the origin of civil government and allegiance. Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their *nature*. All they can do is to change their *situation*, and render the observance of justice the immediate interest of some particular persons, and its violation their more remote.”

¹³⁷Cf. *Treatise*, p. 546: “Education, and the artifice of politicians, concur in bestowing a farther morality on loyalty, and branding all rebellion with a greater degree of guilt and infamy.”

¹³⁸“Of the Origin of Government,” in *Essays*, p. 38. Cf. p. 35: “We are to look upon all the vast apparatus of our government, as having ultimately no other object or purpose but the distribution of justice.” Cf. *Treatise*, p. 543.

¹³⁹*Treatise*, Book 3, Section 8, “Of the Source of Allegiance.”

¹⁴⁰“Of the Original Contract,” in *Essays*, p. 486.

due? Humans are usually born into a state of submission to a government, but a second series of general rules allows us to determine the legitimacy of the governments demanding our obedience, rules that can “regulate and direct our devotion to government.”¹⁴¹ In this regard, Hume seems to have been one of the first to pose the problem of government and power, not in terms of representativity, but credibility: its object is not to represent general interest, but to make general interest an object of belief by managing opinion and manufacturing consent. These determining rules, which Hume discusses at length, are long possession, present possession, violence and conquest, accession, succession, and “positive laws.”¹⁴² Finally, Hume likewise argues that a *correction* of these general rules of allegiance is allowed for, in rare and precise cases, by a certain right to resistance, a legitimacy of revolution which is valid when governments no longer make justice their immediate passion.¹⁴³ Thus the series of general rules concerning government operate in the same three dimensions: establishment, determination, and correction.

c. COMMERCE. Finally, the third set of general cultural rules that Hume considers are discussed by him in a series of important economic essays.¹⁴⁴ The first series of rules gives an extension to interest, a *generality* that it does not have in itself: thus possession becomes property, stability of possession. The second series of rules, those concerning allegiance to government, gives a presence to this general interest, a *vivacity* that it does not have in itself. But the obstacles that society must vanquish are not only the instability of goods, or the abstract character of general interest. There is also the *scarcity* of goods, and stability, far from surmounting this obstacle, instead confirms it, in that it assigns to possession circumstances favorable to the formation of large properties—Hume often develops the idea that, by an internal dialectic, property engenders and develops *inequality*.¹⁴⁵ Thus a third series of rules is necessary to mitigate both inequality and scarcity. These rules will be the object of political economy: to the stability of possession and allegiance to the

¹⁴¹*Treatise*, p. 556.

¹⁴²*Treatise*, pp. 556-563.

¹⁴³*Treatise*, pp. 563-567. Cf. p. 554: “The common rule requires submission; and ‘tis only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place.”

¹⁴⁴These have been collected in Eugene Rotwein, ed., *David Hume: Writings on Economics* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), which contains an useful introduction by the editor.

¹⁴⁵*Enquiries*, p. 194: “Render possessions ever so equal, men’s different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality.” See also *Treatise*, p. 488; and “Of Interest” in *Essays*, pp. 297-298.

government must be added the *prosperity of commerce*.

We will only mention here that, like the preceding types of rules, the prosperity of commerce is determined and corrected. On the one hand, the *determinations* of commerce (monetary circulation, capital, interest, exportation) demonstrate its relation to property, that is, to the first set of rules (stability of possession). Commerce is no less an institution than property, and in fact presupposes property, it implies a preexisting property (economically, property tax is primary).¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, the *corrections* of commerce are dependent on its relations to the State (taxes, services to the State), that is, to the second set of rules (allegiance to government), an accidental relation that comes from the outside. The prosperity of commerce accumulates a labor capital that creates luxury and happiness in its citizens, but which the State, *in cases of need*, can claim for itself.¹⁴⁷

This then is a simplified view of the general rules or moral categories that constitute the artificial world of culture, and which define the means by which Hume's philosophy of the passions forms a general system, which we present, in summary fashion, in the chart on the following page:¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶"Of Interest," in *Essays*, p. 298.

¹⁴⁷"Of Commerce," in *Essays*, p. 262: "It is a violent method, and in most cases impracticable, to oblige the labourer to toil, in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and his family. Furnish him with manufactures and commodities, and he will do it for himself. Afterwards you will find it easy to seize some part of his superfluous labor, and employ it in the public service, without giving him his wonted return." The commodities produced by commerce "are a kind of storehouse of labour, which, in the exigencies of the state, may be turned to the public service" ("Of Refinement in the Arts," in *Essays*, p. 272).

¹⁴⁸Adapted from Deleuze, *Empirisme et subjectivité*, p.46.

THE GENERAL RULES OF CULTURE
(or Moral Categories)

JUSTICE (property)

1. Content of the general rule: *stability of possession*
2. Determination of the general rule by general rules: immediate or present possession; occupation, prescription, accession, and succession.
3. Correction, by general rules, of the preceding determination: transfer of property by consent, performance of promises

GOVERNMENT (allegiance)

1. Support of the general rule: *allegiance to the government*
2. Determination of the support: long possession, present possession, violence and conquest, accession, succession, “positive laws.”
3. Correction: the right to resistance, the legitimacy of revolution

COMMERCE (money)

1. Complement of the general rule: *prosperity of commerce*
 2. Determination of the complement (in relation to property): monetary circulation, capital, interest, exportation, etc.
 3. Correction (in relation to the government): taxes, service to the State, etc.
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B. THE WORLD OF TASTE (Criticism)

13. The “Circumstances of Taste” and the Standard of Taste. Hume defines culture in terms of these general rules of justice, government, and commerce, which artificially extend and integrate the passions so as to bestow upon them a uniformity and vivacity they lack in themselves. If it has been necessary to our purposes to examine them in some detail, it is because these rules in turn constitute the *condition of possibility* for the exercise of taste (or, more precisely, what Hume calls “criticism”). For if the “circumstances of justice” (and therefore society in general) are, objectively, the relative scarcity of goods and, subjectively, the limited generosity of humans, we could likewise define the “circumstances of taste” as the general rules of culture itself: *the domain of taste is not possible apart from the prior establishment of culture*. Like every cultural domain, Hume defines art institutionally as a set of extensive and corrective general rules.¹⁴⁹ But when Hume poses the problem of the Standard of Taste, he is trying to discern the standard by which these general rules of art and composition are formed, and it is here that we confront the primary difference between morality and criticism in Hume’s philosophy: whereas the aim of the institutions of the moral world is integration, the function of the general rules of criticism is *differentiation within culture*.¹⁵⁰

Hume locates the standard for these general rules, not in utility, but in the consensus of an elite group of critics he calls “true judges,” whose “organ” of internal sensation is more or less perfect: “the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.”¹⁵¹ The role of the critic is to ask: Is there, between the various parts of a work, a relation of such a nature that, upon the general survey, it produces in the spectator a sentiment of satisfaction or pleasure? Through the observation of what has pleased and displeased throughout history, the critic makes use of the principles of association to formulate *extensive* rules of art and composition:

¹⁴⁹This language has been derived partly from recent discussions of the “institutional” theory of art (what Danto calls the “Artworld”), though Hume defines it in very different terms. See the essays by George Dickie, Arthur Danto, Anita Silvers, and Robert Stecker collected in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. G. Dickie et al., 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), pp. 171-217.

¹⁵⁰This point is argued by Richard Schusterman in “Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant,” in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 211-229.

¹⁵¹“Of the Standard of Taste,” p. 241. The arts “are always relished by a few only, whose leisure, fortune, and genius fit them for such amusements” (“Of the Rise of the Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, p. 125), and consequently “few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” p. 241).

criticism, like the law, is associationist (“It is on the proportion, relation, and position of parts, that all natural beauty depends”).¹⁵² It is true that the rules of art that Hume himself adumbrates are primarily derived from 18th-century neo-classicism, emphasizing the relations of balance, symmetry, and harmony. “There is no rule in painting or statuary more indispensable,” he writes, “than that of balancing the figures. A figure, which is not justly balanced, is ugly; because it conveys the disagreeable ideas of fall, harm, and pain.”¹⁵³ But the fact that much 20th-century contemporary painting and statuary has dispensed with such a rule is no objection to Hume’s theory, for like the general rules of justice, government, and commerce, the rules of art, “being drawn from established models,” are also subject to perpetual *correction* according to changing circumstances.

14. The “Delicate” and the “Vulgar”: The Recognition of Distinction (the fourth moment in Hume’s definition of taste). In locating the standard of taste in the consensus of these elite critics, Hume rests his theory of taste on a fundamental opposition: between that which is designated by its rarity as “distinguished” or “delicate,” and that which is “vulgar” or “common.” There are, says Hume, “different degrees of taste,” and these degrees are measured by their closeness to or distance from the elite norm that is formalized in general rules. “We must not imagine,” Hume writes, “that on every occasion the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules.” In any given society these “men of delicate taste are *rare*,” though such people “are easily to be *distinguished* in society, by the soundness of their understanding and the *superiority* of their faculties above the rest of mankind.”¹⁵⁴ This opposition, in turn, implies the prior establishment of a socio-cultural hierarchy that provides the measure of distinction, distance, and difference between popular taste and delicate taste. Delicate taste, Hume insists, can only be produced by a preparatory work of discipline that depends to a large degree on numerous empirical social circumstances such as education, economic

¹⁵²*Enquiries*, p. 291. Cf. “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p.232: “The general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observations of the common sentiments of human nature.”

¹⁵³*Enquiries*, p. 245. Other examples: “It is a rule in criticism, that every combination of syllables or letters, which gives pain to the organs of speech in recital, appears also from the species of sympathy harsh and disagreeable to the ear” (p. 224). “It is esteemed contrary to the rules of art to represent anything cool and indifferent. A distant friend, or a confidant, who has no immediate interest in the catastrophe, ought, if possible, to be avoided by the poet; as communicating a like indifference to the audience, and checking the progress of the passions” (p. 222). John Laird provides an interesting summary of Hume’s own critical opinions (largely drawn from the *History*) in *Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1932), pp. 276-281.

¹⁵⁴“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, pp. 232, 236; 242-243.

privilege, and the leisure time for comparison and practice. Beauty and deformity, like vice and virtue, are sentiments of taste, but Hume adds that “it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the *proper* sentiment,” and the fact is that “many feel *not* the proper sentiment.”¹⁵⁵ To borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, humans are differentiated from each other socially not only by *economic* capital, which is derived from and regulated by the general rules of property and commerce, but also by a cultural or “*symbolic* capital,” which is instead derived from and regulated by rules of taste: the competition for the most legitimate cultural goods is a particular case of the competition for rare economic goods and practices.¹⁵⁶

But more importantly, taste also requires an implicit recognition of this hierarchy, a more subtle assumption that the distinctive character of the true judge is indeed “valuable and estimable” to society. The artificial world of culture is a competition, a game, and the mere fact of playing means that one assents to the stakes of the game, and to the odds against which one plays. “Recognition” is thus as necessary a category in the realm of taste as is “distinction,” and this *recognition of distinction* by the members of the social hierarchy is, for Hume, a principle of human nature. The “joint verdict” of “true judges” is the point from which distinction is measured within a culture: “Some men in general will be acknowledged by universal sentiment [=recognition] to have a preference above others [=distinction].”¹⁵⁷ Without this principle, the variety of the aesthetic sentiments would have the same status that impressions have in the imagination, that is, purely differential and unsystematic. The recognition of distinction is the fourth and final moment in Hume’s definition of taste, constituting its material, rather than formal, condition.

This thesis becomes clearer in a number of companion essays where Hume attempts to account for the refined state of the arts in particular societies.¹⁵⁸ In such an investigation, he argues, we cannot be content merely to catalog the sentiments of true judges, but must instead penetrate to the social conditions or “circumstances of taste” that have produced these cultivated few: “it is not altogether a question concerning the taste, genius, and spirit of a few, but concerning those of a whole people....A share of the same spirit and genius must be antecedently diffused throughout the

¹⁵⁵*Enquiries*, p. 173; “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 234.

¹⁵⁶See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), passim.

¹⁵⁷“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 242.

¹⁵⁸Hume undertakes this project primarily in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” (in *Essays*, pp. 111-137), and secondarily in “Of Civil Liberty” (pp. 87-96) and “Of National

people among whom they arise, in order to produce, form, and cultivate, from their earliest infancy, the taste and judgment of those eminent writers. *The mass cannot be altogether insipid, from which such refined spirits are extracted.*¹⁵⁹ Hume thus attempts to account for the high state of the arts in specific societies by considering the state of the general cultural rules that constitute these societies, specifically, the types of government that support the arts, and the forms of commerce that complement them.

With regard to *government*, for instance, Hume argues that the proper “nursery” for the arts and sciences are free governments, which are constrained by general municipal laws, rather than despotic governments, in which authority is delegated to petty ministers unrestrained by any law or statute, and who tend to thwart innovation.¹⁶⁰ With regard to *commerce*, Hume argues that commerce best aids the development of the arts when it connects together small independent governments or principalities, since each serves as a check on the opinions and tastes of the others (as in ancient Greece and, unsurprisingly, Hume’s own 18th-century Europe). When it is limited to the internal intercourse of extended, imperial governments, taste tends to languish under the inertia of tradition and the sprawling homogeneity of manners (China, Egypt, Persia, and the medieval Catholic Church are Hume’s models of states gone stagnant).¹⁶¹

Hume here merely tends to hint at the assumption that lies behind his analyses, but it is one that Nietzsche would later state with brutal lucidity, namely, “that no one would strive for culture if he knew how unbelievably small the number of truly cultured men is and indeed can only be; and yet that even this small number of truly cultured men was not possible unless a great mass, determined, fundamentally, against their nature and only by a seductive illusion, engaged in the pursuit of culture; that therefore nothing should be divulged of the ridiculous disproportion between the number of truly cultivated men and the vast apparatus of culture; that the peculiar secret of culture was this: that countless people work for culture, apparently for themselves, but ultimately only to make a few people possible.”¹⁶² For Hume as for Nietzsche, culture is a machine whose parts are the vast mass

Character” (pp. 197-215).

¹⁵⁹“The Rise of Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, p. 114 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁰“Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, pp. 115-119; “Of Civil Liberty,” pp. 89-91; “Of National Character,” p. 204.

¹⁶¹“The Rise of Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, pp. 119-123; “Of Civil Liberty,” pp. 89-90.

¹⁶²Nietzsche, *Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten*, in *Werke* III (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1966), p. 189, as quoted in Bourdieu, p. 252. From this point of view, Nietzsche’s “Overman” is simply the type of cultured man produced under what he took to be the inevitable social conditions of the

of humanity, but whose product is a relatively small number of truly cultured beings; it is an apparatus that secretes these cultivated humans (“true judges”) as its luxury surplus above and beyond the masses.¹⁶³

15. The Question of Fact: Taste as a Structural Principle. The general rules of culture constitute the circumstances of taste precisely because they are the condition of possibility for the production of true judges. This, it seems to me, is the strategic point of Hume argument. For in making the question of the standard of taste turn on the recognition of true judges, he shifts the problem of taste from the domain of passion and sentiment *back into the domain of the understanding*: the criteria by which we can recognize true judges, he says, are “questions of *fact*, not of sentiment.”¹⁶⁴ The necessity for such a strategy is given by structure of Hume’s philosophy: “All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard.”¹⁶⁵ The standard of taste in this way becomes a scientific result that can be achieved experimentally through the application of the calculus of probabilities. Just as the *Treatise* proposed rules according to which *real* matters of fact could be distinguished from fictive habits and relations, so the primary aim of “Of the Standard of Taste” is to propose a decision procedure by which *true* judges can be identified within culture (“strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice can alone entitle critics to this valuable character”).¹⁶⁶ Such critics are the only terms qualified to be admitted into the calculus, and the probabilistic outcome of the calculus is precisely the “joint verdict” of such critics throughout history. If there is a difference between these two applications of the calculus, it is that the first is applied to the parts of *Nature* in order to distinguish fact from fiction, while the

future (cf. *Will to Power*, &866).

¹⁶³Bourdieu (p. 12) helpfully distinguishes between two senses of the word “culture,” i.e., culture as the process of cultivating (education, etc.), and culture as the state of that which is cultivated (delicacy of taste).

¹⁶⁴“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 242.

¹⁶⁵“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 230.

¹⁶⁶“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 241. Cf. p. 229: “It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a *decision*, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.”

second is applied to the parts of *Culture*, which are themselves immediately fictional, in order to distinguish the refined from the vulgar.

Hume's theory of taste is not circular, as has often been claimed, but rather structural.¹⁶⁷ Taste is a separative power that structures, hierarchizes, and classifies, and Hume's search for a standard of taste is a search for the principles of this structuring activity. He locates them in the system of general rules of art, which is not a system of universal forms and categories, but a system of internalized propensities and extended passions that, having been constituted in the course of collective history by the consensus of true judges, are then acquired in the course of an individual's history and function in their practical state (for practice, and not for pure knowledge). But while taste classifies art objects, it also classifies the classifier: the classifications of the objects of taste are *at the same time* classifications of the subjects doing the classifying. In synchronic terms, there is at any one moment a sort of fuzzy isomorphic relation between the two sets (objective elements and relations, subjective sentiments), though in diachronic terms, this relation is in more or less continuous variation throughout history. The general rules of art are rules that classify not only the relative merits of the artistic composition of objects, but also the sentiments of subjects and the distinctions they make, which betrays their differential position in the artificial field of culture: at the upper level of the scale, "true judges" are betrayed by the ease by which they can recognize beautiful works (which reflects a type of cultivated naturalness); at the lower level, bad critics (not to mention the "insipid" mass), lacking this distinctive and culturally learned trait, are pleased by inferior works, and can be silenced by appeal to the elite norm.¹⁶⁸

16. The Example of Kant. Certainly Hume's reduction of the social hierarchy to a simple

¹⁶⁷According to the critique of circularity, Hume defines good art by the judgments of good critics, but good critics are defined by their experience with and reaction to good art. For discussions of this criticism, see Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard: Breaking the Circle," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 7 (1967), pp. 57-66; and Noel Carroll, "Hume Standard of Taste," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1984), pp. 181-194.

¹⁶⁸Cf. "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 236. Bourdieu, for example, in his massive analysis of taste in contemporary French culture, distinguishes between "legitimate taste" (the taste for legitimate works of art, such as *The Well-Tempered Clavier*); "middle-brow taste" (the taste for minor works of the major arts, such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, or major works of the minor arts); and "popular taste" (taste for "light music" or classical music devalued by popularization, such as the *Blue Danube*, or popular music devoid of artistic pretension), noting that such a scale often indicates a diminishing of educational capital. The uneasiness of "pretention" would be an intermediate position that manifests the

dichotomy between a cultured elite and the more or less “insipid” mass, or between what Ortega y Gasset, writing of modern art, would later characterize as two antagonistic “castes” (“those who understand and those who do not”), is at best a faint intimation of the more complex social groupings recognized by later theorists such as Bourdieu, whose theory of taste is perhaps the most direct contemporary extension of Hume’s (despite his tendency, because of statistical limitations, to reduce distinctions to class differences).¹⁶⁹ Bourdieu, to my mind, has extended Hume’s analyses in at least two ways. First, he has shown how a complete theory of taste would have to be extended beyond the refined realm of art into such cultural domains as the elementary taste for the flavors of food, taste in clothing and fashion, and even in sport.¹⁷⁰ Second, and perhaps more importantly, he has shown how essential the delicate/vulgar dichotomy is to *any* possible theory of taste, and has proposed a “Humean” reading of the immediate successor to Hume’s essay, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, which shows how the “vulgar” or “barbarous” aesthetic of the masses appears as the negative opposite of the “pure” aesthetic, implicitly answering each proposition of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” with a contradictory thesis.¹⁷¹

discrepancy between ambition and actuality (*Distinction*, pp. 99-100).

¹⁶⁹José Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art” (1925), in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1956), pp. 5-6.

¹⁷⁰For instance, Bourdieu shows how, in the domain of food and clothing, the “common” aesthetic emphasizes *content and substance* (“meat and potatoes,” elastic and abundant dishes such as soups and pasta that do not need to be measured or divided, as opposed to foods, like roasts, that need to be cut and divided among people in well-defined portions) while the more “delicate” aesthetic emphasizes *form and appearance* (ritualized meals, the art of entertaining; well-tailored suits as opposed to functional overalls and boots). And in the domain of sport, Bourdieu shows that different social groups expect different profits from sports, be they physical profits (such as effects on the external body, like slimness, elegance, or visible muscles; and on the internal body, like health or relaxation); physical costs (such as the degree of risk and physical effort); or extrinsic profits (such as the social relations a sport may facilitate, or possible economic or social advantages). Thus, the “popular” aesthetic produces dispositions such as the cult of manliness, the taste for a fight, sense of solidarity (the “mates,” “buddies”) and revelry, resistance to tiredness and pain, and toughness in the man-to-man battles of “contact” sports (football, rugby, wrestling, boxing, etc.). By contrast, the elite aesthetic can tend toward an type of “aristocratic asceticism,” preferring solitary and introverted sports that avoid direct bodily contact and often emphasize individual expression (such as running, yoga, dancing) or “man’s struggle with nature” rather than with human competitors (skiing, sailing, mountaineering, hiking—as Hume might say, there is no “natural” return to nature), “cybernetic” sports that require a high cultural input (flying, parachuting), and generally, the valorization of the pure, the “authentic,” the search for new experiences and virgin spaces that exclusively, or firstly, belong to the elite. See Bourdieu, pp. 190-201, 211-215, and *passim*.

¹⁷¹Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 41, 5. In the Appendix to the *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith

For instance, when Kant strives to apprehend the specificity of aesthetic judgments, he distinguishes that which “pleases” disinterestedly and freely (the “beautiful”) from that which merely “gratifies” or is enjoyed by the Senses (the “agreeable”) and that which is merely “esteemed” or approved of by Reason (the “good”).¹⁷² Any aesthetic pleasure that is contaminated by an *ethical* or practical interest, which judges a work according to a norm of morality (when characters embody an ideal, say, or when it carries an ethical meaning or “message”), or that is dependent on an *affective* interest, a charming of the senses, is condemned as “vulgar” and excluded from the pure aesthetic (which is thus a kind of pleasureless pleasure, a pleasure purified of pleasure).¹⁷³ The paradigms of mere “agreeableness” or “gratification” are bodily pleasures (primarily oral and sexual forms of satisfaction),¹⁷⁴ which for Kant imply a reduction of the human to the animal, to the merely corporeal, to the pure affect and simple sensation (*aisthesis*), to the belly and sex, and thus to a lowest common denominator upon and against which moral and aesthetic distinction is constructed.¹⁷⁵ For the same reason, the elite aesthetic refuses everything that is *facile* (light, frivolous, shallow, superficial), that insults the refinement of critics by inviting them to regress to the most primitive and elementary forms of pleasure that challenge human freedom and autonomy, whether they be the

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), Kant notes that “the true propaedeutic for laying the foundations of taste is the *development* of moral ideas and the *culture* of the moral feeling,” which is “produced by a sound preparatory *education*” (*Critique of Judgment*, ‘60, p. 227, 226). He here admits that culture is an essential “circumstance” for the exercise of taste, but that it is a mere propaedeutic to the analysis of elite taste.

¹⁷²Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §§1-5, pp. 41-50. This is Kant’s first moment of Quality: “Taste is the faculty of estimating an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such delight is called beautiful” (p. 50).

¹⁷³Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §12, p. 64. In “pure” aesthetics, the aesthetic judgment, as opposed to the practical judgment, “is merely contemplative and does not bring about an interest in the object.”

¹⁷⁴Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §13, p. 65: “Taste that requires an added element of *charm* and *emotion* for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, *has not yet emerged from barbarism*.” Hume is more forthright in identifying the social origin of such a judgment: “We are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, p. 227).

¹⁷⁵Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ‘40, p. 151: “Common human understanding which, as mere sound (*not yet cultivated*) understanding, is looked upon as the *least* we can expect from any one claiming the name of man, has therefore the doubtful honor of having the name of common sense (*sensus communis*) bestowed upon it; and bestowed, too, in an acceptation of the word *common*..., which makes it amount to what is *vulgar*—what is everywhere to be met with—a quality which by no means confers credit or distinction upon its possessor.” Cf. p. 49: “Agreeableness is a significant factor even with irrational animals; beauty has purport and significance only for human beings.”

passive satisfactions of the infantile taste for sweet liquids (syrupy, sugary, schmaltzy) or the quasi-animal gratifications of sexual desire.¹⁷⁶

Similarly, the masses demand a participation in works of art as if they were real-life events, taking an *interest*, for instance, in the human destinies put before them, sympathizing with the joys and sufferings of the characters; while “pure” taste, on the contrary, is marked by a *disinterested* and detached indifference, a refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously, to surrender vulgarly to easy seduction and collective enthusiasm. It appropriates the objects of popular taste by displacing the interest from the “content” (plot, characters, etc.) to “form,” to the specifically artistic effects that are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the immediately given work. The elite disposition is interested in formal experimentation, whereas popular taste considers formalism to be a sort of aggression, an affront to common sense and sensible people.¹⁷⁷

And when Kant writes that “beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as it is perceived in it apart from the representation of an end,”¹⁷⁸ he is condemning the tendency of popular taste to judge a work of art by reference to the *function* or end it fulfills (or could fulfill) for the person who looks at it. If popular taste prefers naturalist or realist representation, it is because it subordinates form to function, affirming a continuity between art and life: a realist work is justified if the thing represented is worthy of being represented, if the representative function is subordinated to a higher function (such as that of capturing and exalting a reality that is worthy of being made eternal). The value of the work of art is measured by the interest of the information it conveys, and by the clarity with which it fulfills this informative function, the judgment it provokes being more or less favorable depending on the expressive adequacy of work to what it intends to represent. Formal explorations (nonfigurative painting, avant-garde theatre, or even classical music) are disconcerting to popular taste because it is unable to understand what these artworks “mean,” to interpret their

¹⁷⁶Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ‘42, p. 162: “We regard as coarse and low the habits of thought of those who have no feeling for beautiful nature...and who devote themselves to the mere enjoyments of sense to be found in eating and drinking” Schopenhauer, commenting on Kant, condemns the depictions of Dutch still lifes, which excite the oral appetite for the foods they represent, and certain nudes, which excite the sexual passions of the beholder. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indian Hills, Colorado: Falcon’s Wing Press, 1958), Vol. 1, pp. 207-208.

¹⁷⁷Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁷⁸Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, &17, p. 80.

function.

These brief comments merely serve to demonstrate that it is impossible for Kant to describe the “pure” aesthetic without also describing the “common” aesthetic that it sets itself up against, and vice-versa. There is no *neutral*, impartial, or “pure” description of either of these opposite visions: the popular aesthetic is defined in relation to “high” aesthetics, which imposes itself as the standard of taste, and never ceases to pass a negative judgment on popular taste and its experience of beauty. The Humean opposition between “true judges” and the “insipid mass” gives rise to a whole series of differential oppositions that are the coordinates for any possible theory of taste (high vs. low; pure vs. impure; spiritual vs. material; sublime vs. vulgar; elegant vs. coarse; facile vs. difficult; expensive vs. cheap; unique vs. ordinary, and so on.). There is thus an *indivisibility* to the domain of taste, a unity of the most “pure” and the most sublime tastes, and the most “impure” and “coarse,” ordinary and primitive tastes. The high and the low only exist through each other, and Kant identified as the universal what Hume recognized to be merely the universe of cultivated people.¹⁷⁹

Conclusion. My aim in this paper has been to examine the position of taste within the order of reasons in the *Treatise*. We have seen that Hume’s philosophy starts from the “given,” a flux of impressions and ideas that are separable, distinguishable, and different, and the subject (human nature) is defined as a movement, a movement to develop itself or to become other than the “given” through the application of principles. This movement is double. On the one hand, the subject *believes*, that is, it infers more than it knows, it can infer from the given the existence of something that is *not* given (Caesar is dead, Rome existed, the sun will rise, bread nourishes): in the same operation and at the same time, I judge and I posit myself as a subject, and thereby go beyond the given (the system of the understanding). On the other hand, the subject also *invents*, it forms moral, aesthetic, and social judgments by disengaging from what affects it a power independent of its actual exercise, thereby going beyond its own partiality and making artifice and invention possible: the subject

¹⁷⁹When Kant asks how “the delight of any one person may be pronounced as a rule for any other,” he answers that the “universality validity [of taste] is not to be based on a collection of votes and interrogation of others as to what sort of sensations they experience, but is to rest, as it were, upon an autonomy of the Subject passing judgement on the feeling of pleasure (in the given representation), i.e., upon his own taste....Taste lays claim simply to autonomy. To make the judgments of others the determining ground of one’s own would be heteronomy” (*Critique of Judgment*, 32, p. 135-137). Hume’s point is that only the “true judge” can be said to have attained *aesthetic* autonomy, since the vulgar mingle pure aesthetic pleasure with ethical and sensible pleasures.

reflects and is reflected, it invents, it is artificial (the system of the passions). Hume defines human nature through this double power of believing and inventing.

The heart of Hume's philosophy lies in his Newtonian theory of extensive and corrective general rules that govern each of these systems, and that attempt to mediate the "conflict of faculties" between the formative power of the imagination and the corrective capabilities of the understanding, between fiction and human nature: the extensive and corrective general rules of the understanding (philosophical and unphilosophical probability), and the extensive and corrective general rules of the passions (justice, government, commerce, art, and religion). We have seen that taste lies at the nexus of these two sets of principles: beauty, says Hume, is the concurrence of a perception of the minute parts and relations in an object (association) and the sensation of a pleasurable impression in the subject (passion). These two sets of principles have very different effects on the operation of taste. To summarize:

On the one hand, association is always subordinated to passion in Hume: it is the passions that assign a direction to relations as a function of circumstance. But since the passions are defined by their partiality, they can achieve a constancy and generality only through the invention of artificial institutions and rules that make use of the modes of association to extend the passions beyond their natural limitations and variability. These general rules of passion are determined by the imagination in accordance with the principle of utility, and together constitute the illusory and fictive world of culture. On the other hand, we have seen that, whereas the general rules of justice, politics, and economy have an integrative function, the general rules of art instead serve as a means by which a system of differentiations and distinctions are established *within* culture. The measure of these distinctions can only be found by positing a differential point of reference within the system of culture. Hume locates this "standard of taste" in the position of "true judges," which are the highest products of culture (as are the great works of art), and stand in opposition to the rude sentiments of the "insipid mass." But the "joint verdict" of such judges can only be determined by the understanding through the application of the calculus (general rules of philosophical probability) to the sentiments of these true judges throughout history. The "general rules of art" and "the standard of taste" are two separate concepts in Hume's theory of taste, and the standard of taste, in turn, is itself marked by two moments: in a particular culture, the position of true judges is the standard (a product of the system of the passions), but from the viewpoint of history, the final arbiter of taste is their "joint verdict" (a product of the system of the understanding).

Hume had apparently intended to include a book entitled “Of Criticism” in the *Treatise*, and though he never realized this ambition, he thought he had “laid the foundation” for it “in his account of the passions.”¹⁸⁰ “Of the Standard of Taste” is all that remains of this project. On its own, the essay is a dense and sometimes confusing work, and we have been guided throughout this essay by Hume’s own conviction that its complex network of ideas and principles can only be untangled by interpreting it in light of the foundation laid down in the *Treatise of Human Nature*.

¹⁸⁰*Treatise*, p. 646.