Hume, History and the Science of Human Nature

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July, 2002

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial

fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Ph.D.

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Résumé

Cette thèse se propose de montrer qu'une réflexion philosophique sur l'histoire est constitutive du projet humien d'une science de l'homme, au sens fort où le projet d'établir une science de la nature humaine est conçu comme étant indissociable d'une compréhension de l'historicité du sujet. Si Hume est souvent perçu comme un critique de la métaphysique traditionnelle cherchant à mesurer la connaissance humaine à l'aune de l'expérience, il est aussi généralement admis que par « expérience » il n'entend que ce qui résulte de l'observation personnelle d'un sujet isolé. De cette façon, sa critique de la métaphysique aboutit à une conception individualiste de la connaissance et de la nature humaine. Je soutiens au contraire qu'il a une conception beaucoup plus raffinée de l'expérience comme étant constituée non seulement par l'observation et la mémoire personnelles mais aussi, fondamentalement, par une connaissance implicite de l'historie humaine. Ainsi comprise, l'expérience permet d'atteindre ce que je nomme le point de vue historique c'est-à-dire, le point de vue d'un sujet qui cherche à étendre son expérience autant que possible pour être en mesure de produire des jugements plus nuancés et impartiaux dans les pratiques sociales où il se voit impliqué. Le point de vue historique nous permet de transcender la perspective individualiste à laquelle nous serions condamnés autrement, non seulement au plan épistémologique mais, surtout, aux plans politique, social, religieux, etc.

Le chapitre I décrit le fond historique sur lequel Hume élabore sa conception du rôle de l'histoire dans son projet philosophique. Le chapitre II vise à montrer, contre l'interprétation individualiste, que la philosophie humienne possède les ressources philosophiques nécessaires pour rendre compte de la connaissance historique et, plus particulièrement, des croyances formées par la voie intersubjective du témoignage. Le chapitre III décrit la conception humienne de l'explication comme étant fondée sur le modèle des explications informelles de l'histoire et non sur celui des explications formelles des sciences de la nature. Finalement, le chapitre IV discute la conception humienne de l'expérience dans sa double relation à la théorie de la perception et au projet d'une « science de l'homme ».

Abstract

This thesis sets out to show that a philosophical reflection on history is, in the strongest possible way, an essential feature of Hume's project of a science of human nature: a philosophical investigation of human nature, for Hume, cannot be successful independently of an understanding of the relation of human beings to their history. Hume intended to criticize traditional metaphysics by referring all knowledge to experience. But it is almost always assumed that Hume means by "experience" the result of an individual's past sense perception or personal observation. Accordingly, Hume's criticism of traditional metaphysics is taken to lead to an individualistic conception of knowledge and human nature. In this thesis I claim that this picture of Hume's "empiricism" is simply wrong. He is not a philosopher who reduces "experience" to the merely private happenings within a personal psychology. On the contrary, Hume has a wider notion of experience, one that includes not only personal observation and memory, but, fundamentally, one that includes implicit knowledge of human history. Experience, so understood, brings about what I term a historical point of view, namely, the point of view of someone who seeks to extend his experience as far as it is possible in order to acquire the capacity to produce more nuanced and impartial judgments in any given practice. It is precisely this historical point of view that enables us to depart from the individualistic perspective that we would otherwise be bound to adopt not only in epistemology but, most significantly, in politics, in social life, in religion, etc.

Chapter 1 presents the historical background against which Hume elaborates his views of history's role in philosophy. Chapter 2 discusses and criticizes the individualist reading of Hume by showing that he had a satisfactory account of beliefs formed via human testimony. Chapter 3 presents a view of Hume on explanation that underscores his interest in practical and informal explanations as those of history. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of Hume's notion of historical experience in relation both to his theory of perception and to his project of a "science of man."

Acknowledgements

Method of Citation

Citations to Hume's texts are given parenthetically according to the following convention: an abbreviation followed by book, part, section or chapter number and paragraph or by an abbreviation, then, following a comma, the page number of the particular edition of the text being cited. Thus (T 1.3.9.4) refers to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 1, part 3, section 9, paragraph 4, in the edition described below at T, while (HE 1: 322) refers to *The History of England*, volume 1, p. 322 of the edition described below at HE. References to the *Essays* include, following a hyphen, an abbreviation of the title of the particular essay cited. Thus (E-ST, 230) refers to *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 230 in the edition described below at E, where all additional abbreviations of essay titles are listed.

E	*Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty *Classics*, rev. ed., 1985). Abbreviations of the individual essays cited in this volume:
E-DM	Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature
E-E	Of Eloquence
E-NC	Of National Characters
E-RP	Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences
E-SH	Of the Study of History
E-ST	Of the Standard of Taste
EHU	Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding: A critical Edition.* Tom L. Beauchamp ed, *The Clarendon Edition of the works of David Hume.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
EPM	Hume, David, and Tom L. Beauchamp. *An enquiry concerning the principles of morals : a critical edition.* Edited by David Hume, *The Clarendon edition of the works of David Hume.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
HE	*A History of England* (first published 1754-62), 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty *Classics*, 1983).
HL	*The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).
L	*A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh: containing Observations on . . . the Principles . . . said to be maintain'd in . . . .* A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. E. C. Mossner and J. V. Price, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967).
T	Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature.* David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

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Introduction

This thesis sets out to show that a philosophical reflection on history is an essential feature of Hume's project of a science of human nature. History can, of course, relate in many ways to the kind of philosophical project that Hume undertakes. More particularly then, I claim that a philosophical reflection on history is related to Hume's project of a "science of man" in the strongest possible way because, for Hume, a philosophical investigation of human nature cannot be successful independently of an understanding of the relation of human beings to their history. In this sense I believe that Hume's philosophy shares with those of Vico and Hegel, who are often considered to be at his antipodes, the claim that history plays a constitutive role in metaphysics.

Like Hegel, Hume intended to criticize traditional metaphysics by referring all knowledge, including that which results from the activity of reason alone, to experience. It is almost always assumed that Hume, unlike Hegel, means by "experience" the result of our past sense perception, that is, the result of personal observation. Accordingly, Hume's criticism of traditional metaphysics is often taken to have been carried out on behalf of an individualistic conception of knowledge and human nature, a conception that is often praised for its contributions to debates in epistemology, but that seems to have little to say about the normative role of philosophy, about philosophy as a way of understanding and guiding human life in a social world. It is still common to think of Hume as a negative skeptic who provided powerful criticisms of traditional metaphysics but, because of his "empiricism", cannot give a satisfactory account of the status of the normative concepts that guide us in our dealings with the world. In this view, Hume's negative contribution is seen as a necessary step towards the transcendental investigation by which Kant intended to account for our possession and use of basic concepts.

In this thesis I claim that this picture of Hume's "empiricism" is simply wrong. He is not a philosopher who reduces "experience" to the merely private happenings within a personal psychology. On the contrary, Hume has a wider notion of experience, one that includes not only personal observation and memory, but, fundamentally, one that contains implicit knowledge of human history, a knowledge that in turn provides a more complex and nuanced awareness of both the natural and moral worlds. As Hume puts it, "[a] man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century" (E-SH 566-67). The experience to which Hume means to reduce all knowledge is not the personal observational history of a single person, but that extended experience of the "historical individual."

This *extended* notion of experience with which I credit Hume is extended not only in the sense that it includes information provided by others, including past generations, but also in the sense that it includes an appropriation of past practices as exerted in history and social life. In this sense of "experience," one learns from history not only what others have discovered and observed, but also ways of doing. When we learn any given skill, say, that of driving a car, we learn ways of driving that include a reflection of the past experiences, of others, of driving. Thus, certain rules that we are taught or that we simply imitate are the result of lessons others have learned about avoiding accidents or solving practical problems, etc. When we are taught any given skill we are taught rules that contain sediments of past practices.

Thus it is that historical experience implies not only an assimilation of knowledge inherited from the past, but, more importantly, an assimilation of many of the past practices of humanity that are implicitly present in our every day interactions with the world. When I claim that a reflection of history is an essential part of Hume's metaphysics, I mean that his account of how it is that we have concepts for referring to a public world, and that we apply in our everyday practice, reflects this wider

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understanding of experience as historical. When Hume refers all knowledge to experience, he means that both our knowledge of facts and our knowledge of the rules by which we judge of facts, both moral and empirical facts, result from an appropriation of what has been gained in history, both by the acquisition of knowledge and by the development, the perfecting, of the rules that guide our multiple social practices, including that of judging.

Experience, so understood, brings about what I term a historical point of view, namely, the point of view of someone who seeks to extend his experience as far as it is possible in order to acquire the capacity to produce more nuanced and impartial judgments in any given practice. It is precisely this historical point of view that enables us to depart from the individualistic perspective that we would otherwise be bound to adopt not only in epistemology but, most significantly, in politics, in social life, in religion, etc. When we read Hume as a philosopher who has other interests besides causation and belief, we see him also as a philosopher worried about the devastating effects of religious and political partisanship in political life, and, more generally, with the effects of prejudice. This is a constant concern in Hume's *Essays* and particularly in the texts on religion. And as has been recently pointed out, his *History of England* can also be read as an attempt to produce an impartial account that will help reconstitute the social and political memory of England in ways that permit reconciliation between parties still struggling with the wounds opened by past religious and political quarrels.[1]

Reflection on past practices enables us to correct our spontaneous reactions in aesthetics, in morals, in politics and even in sense perception. We "see" things differently when we know that there are other possible points of view. And when we learn that a point of view resulting from a critical appropriation and examination of

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[1] Cf. Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

past practices is possible, we also learn that there is always a more expert point of view, the point of view of someone who can cite *reasons* for correcting our spontaneous and unreflective commitments in the different areas of social life. The historical point of view constitutes a standard of objectivity, not in the sense that it constitutes a perfectly stable point of view of reality, but in the sense that it reflects the best possible available and extended experience, and that it is against this background experience that it can give reasons for perceiving things in one way rather than another.

If this is an adequate picture of what Hume is after in his science of human nature, then one can only wonder about the overwhelming silence, in the body of Hume scholarship, regarding his philosophical reflections on history.[2] This silence is the more striking that Hume devoted more pages to the writing of history than to works in philosophy, as his voluminous *History of England* shows. As has been recently noted, Hume's own reputation was, until well into the nineteenth century, largely based on his work as a historian, this to the extent that the entry for David Hume in the British Library Catalogue still distinguishes him from others of the same name by the description "the historian."[3] In addition, the view of Hume as the father of contemporary forms of empiricism and naturalism has been so strong that some have

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[2] There are, of course, some notable exceptions.I will review and discuss in the following chapters works that have devoted attention to the connection between Hume's philosophy and history. Noteworthy are: Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), David Fate Norton, "History and Philosophy in Hume's Thought," in *David Hume: Philosophical Historian,* ed. David Fate Norton and Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1965), Spencer K. Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History: Historical Theory and Practice* (Lanhan: University Press of America, 2000).

[3] David Wootton, "David Hume, the Historian," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 307, n. 1.

preferred to account for his historical writings as the result of a shift in career. Collingwood expressed this view by saying that Hume "deserted philosophical studies in favour of historical at about the age of thirty five."[4] In Collingwood's view, Hume's philosophical works are essentially ahistorical, and his historical works, fundamentally non-philosophical.

The silence, I think, can be accounted for by the predominance of three readings of Hume that are challenged by the interpretation I defend. Hume's Scottish critics such as Thomas Reid, James Beattie and George Campbell already in the eighteenth century advanced the first of these interpretations. The founders of the Scottish Common Sense school depicted Hume as a radical and negative skeptic who claimed that there is no foundation for such necessary and basic beliefs as that there is an external world or such a thing as personal identity. One of the first casualties of Hume's skepticism was, in the opinion of Reid and Campbell, historical testimony. A skeptic like Hume endowed with a solipsistic account of experience that leaves room only for personal observation and memory as reliable belief-forming processes, could not, these critics claimed, account for so basic a feature of human beings as the fact the many of our most entrenched beliefs are shaped socially by the acceptance of the testimony of others and, most significantly, by the acceptance of historical testimony.

In the twentieth century, positivist scholars such as A. J. Ayer or Carl Hempel presented Hume as the first philosopher to align philosophical reflection with scientific enquiry. In this interpretation, which is not always accompanied with a careful reading of texts, Hume is seen as the first philosopher who embraced a verificationist theory of meaning, and thereby contending that only those sentences that are pure relations of ideas or refer to empirically verifiable matters of fact have meaning. On this view, Hume is seen as the philosopher who first claimed that

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[4] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 73.

philosophical discourse can only be meaningful if tributary to the language of mathematics and theoretical physics. Needless to say, in this interpretation little room was left for attention to Hume's care for history or historical knowledge.

The third interpretation, and that which is the most influential among Hume scholars, is that initiated by Norman Kemp Smith. In a 1905 article published in *Mind*, Kemp Smith provided strong and convincing arguments against the interpretation of Hume as a radical skeptic who brought to the logical, skeptical, and absurd conclusion the theses of such earlier empiricists as Locke and Berkeley. Against that reading of Hume, Kemp Smith claimed that, in fact, Hume was not at all a skeptic, but, rather, a philosopher who sought to establish "a purely naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instinct ..."[5] Hume's skeptical arguments about the external world, the self, and causation are, in Kemp Smith's reading, attacks not on the beliefs themselves, but on the pretension of reason to find justifications for holding these beliefs. These basic beliefs, that there is a world outside us, that we have an identity, and that the causal relations by which we attempt to understand events in the world have objective validity, are not things over which we have rational control. They are merely original and irrepressible natural or instinctive beliefs, and consequently they are not in need of justification. The central feature that Kemp Smith finds in Hume is the so-called "subordination thesis", the claim that reason is merely the "slave of the passions", is thoroughly subordinated to our passions, and thus has virtually no role in the formation of our basic beliefs. On this reading, Hume, not being a skeptic, is not thought to be lacking an account of how is it that we have and use the basic concepts that inform our understanding of the world and of ourselves. He is not in waiting for Kant's transcendental account of our possession and use of these concepts. That we have and need such basic concepts is,

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[5] Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind* 14, no. 54 (1905): p. 150. Kemp Smith fully developed the arguments of his early article in, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1940).

for Hume, an original fact of our nature that cannot be further investigated. The naturalist reading of Hume, of which Barry Stroud[6] is also a noteworthy exponent, has been largely successful in demoting the interpretation of Hume as a negative skeptic,[7] but its insistence on the spontaneity of our central beliefs, if granted, leaves little room for claiming that a reflection on history can be of any significance for understanding Hume's central philosophical commitments.

These different interpretations yield significantly different accounts of Hume's metaphysics. The traditional interpretation of Hume as a negative skeptic has it that he cannot have any positive account of metaphysics because he denies as intelligible precisely those concepts that make a metaphysical discourse possible in the first place. The positivist interpretation holds that Hume demolished metaphysics and opened the path for an assimilation of philosophical inquiries into the practice of the natural sciences and to the conceptual analysis proper to the formal disciplines. Finally, the naturalist interpretation also suggests that there is no Humean metaphysics because there is virtually nothing to say that metaphysics consists in a certain number of beliefs that we cannot help but to entertain. The choice is between the radical skeptic, the obsessive scientific, and the incontinent sentimental, if I may be allowed a small bit of oversimplification.

By showing that history plays a central, informing role in our experience, that it enables us to depart from our limited, personal point of view, I present a Hume who is not only able to deal positively with the traditional philosophical tasks, but who also

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[6] Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1988). See also Stroud's "Hume's Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1 (1991).

[7] Those not converted include Wayne Waxman, who defends the thesis that Hume's "naturalism not only is undetachable from the scepticism, but actually dovetails into it." Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 16.

has an interesting *alternative account* of metaphysics, understood as a science of human nature, an account of both our use of norms and our knowledge of facts learned in experience, understood in the wider sense I have sketched. [8]

Among the possible objections to my reading of Hume, there is one that is the more powerful for its simple-mindedness. This objection, against previous attempts to challenge the individualistic reading of Hume, has been already raised by Antony Flew. The objection is this: how is it that such a sophisticated, nay, such an important philosophical revolution has passed unnoticed for so long a time? How is it possible that Reid, for example, a perceptive philosopher, did not notice, during his whole philosophical career, that Hume's philosophy pre-empted all the objections that he so painstakingly raised against the author of the *Treatise*?[9] Against this objection, I argue that Hume's approach, as I represent it, appears now to be "revolutionary" merely because we have a fixed image of the nature of the philosophical debate of the eighteenth century. We see this debate as a relentless battle between "empiricists" and "rationalists". I argue that the point of view I see Hume as defending was not uncommon, and that, on the contrary it reveals Hume's appropriation of an important skeptical tradition that has been systematically ignored in contemporary scholarship: the tradition of *historical pyrrhonism*. It was in the debates over various forms of

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[8] My own interpretation draws on the work of scholars who have recently emphasized the importance and value of a unified interpretation of Hume, one that takes into account his contributions to moral theory, history, philosophy of religion, and politics. Such commentators as Annette Baier, Donald Livingston, David Fate Norton, and Terence Penelhum have directed our attention to this wider picture of Hume. See e.g. Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments : Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*; David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*; Terence Penelhum, *Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1975), and, *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[9] See Antony Flew, "Impressions and Experiences: Public or Private," *Hume Studies* 11, no. 2 (1987): p. 183-184.

skepticism about history that two important notions were framed: 1) the idea that historical testimony plays a crucial role in shaping most of our empirical beliefs; and 2) the notion that, in learning about the rules by which we judge of those facts of which we have no direct observational access, we learn an alternative way (alternative to the empiricist and rationalist options) of conceiving the foundations of both normativity and empirical knowledge.

In the work that follows I mean to accomplish the following tasks.

1) To present an account of *historical pyrrhonism* or what I call the legal-historical approach to facts.

2) To show that Hume's central philosophical tenets are consistent with the legal-historical approach.

3) To argue against those common interpretations of Hume that obscure the relation of Hume's philosophy to philosophical reflection on history.

4) To claim that Hume's science of human nature is conceived from the point of view I define as historical, and that it reflects a critical appropriation historical experience.

In chapter 1 I argue that in accounts of the debate on the foundations of empirical knowledge in the early-modern period it is typicaly assumed that the debate was between a group of philosophers, the "empiricists," who claim that the foundations of knowledge have to be sought in sense experience, and another group of philosophers, the "rationalists", who claim this foundation to be reason. This representation of Hume's historical background leaves us no choice but to place him among the "empiricists", thus reinforcing the standard interpretation of him as holding an individualistic theory of knowledge and experience that excludes testimony as a reliable source for forming beliefs. I argue that an important debate about the status of historical knowledge, a debate that turned around the theses of the so-called "historical pyrrhonists" or skeptics about the possibility of having historical knowledge, played an important role in informing a view of the foundations of

empirical knowledge that was substantially different from both "empiricism" and "rationalism". In the course of this little-known debate, the crucial question of whether testimony was a reliable source of knowledge was raised, and the conditions in which testimony becomes a reliable source of knowledge was given a detailed examination. I argue that a legal historical approach to empirical knowledge was elaborated in the context of these debates on historical pyrrhonism. The legal historical approach considered the problems of empirical knowledge from the point of view assumed by judges, lawyers and historians, that is, the point of view of individuals who have to *establish* facts, but who have no other access to these facts than testimony, and no other norms for determining the reliability of testimony than those that practice and past experience show to be the more trustworthy.

In chapter 2 I argue against the standard reading of Hume as a philosopher who makes empirical knowledge depend exclusively on sense perception. This standard reading implies that Hume ruled out testimony as a reliable source of knowledge, and as a result assumes that he cannot have a satisfactory account of historical knowledge. Against this reading, I argue that Hume shared with the legal-historical approach the view that human testimony can be as reliable a source of beliefs as sense perception. Moreover, Hume also believed that testimony-dependent beliefs constitute the majority of our empirical beliefs, and thus that accounting for historical knowledge was of central importance for his philosophy.

Chapter 3 discusses the influence of the legal-historical approach in shaping Hume's conception of explanation. I present Hume's account of explanation as modeled not after the abstract method of the natural sciences, but, rather, after the method of the practical and historical disciplines. Two interpretations of Hume on explanation are discussed. The first holds that Hume took a covering-law approach to explanation, a view which either implies that he reduced historical explanations to the model of explanations in the natural sciences, or that he considered historical explanations as falling below the highest standards of scientific explanation. A second interpretation

holds that Hume took two different approaches to explanation, a covering-law approach in the natural sciences, and a hermeneutic approach in the moral and historical disciplines. My own account draws on Hume's conception of practical inferential reasoning and the way Hume actually explains in the *History of England* and in other works. In this account, I show that Hume took a contextualist approach to explanation, one that looks for concrete explanations to singular events that, for some reason, disappoint our expectations. I also argue that this account of Humean explanations can be rendered compatible with scientific explanations, and that it has the advantage of being more consistent with Hume's own practice than does the covering-law interpretation. This account also preserves the unity or "system" that Hume intended for his science of human nature, for moral and historical explanations are shown to have the same structure as those of natural philosophy, and that the former differ from the latter only insofar as the former deal with more complex contexts.

My goal in chapter 4 is to show that Hume's theory of impressions and ideas and his conception of experience are also consistent with the legal-historical approach. Whereas Hume is typically supposed to maintain that ideas and experience are entirely "private," I argue that Hume's theory of "perceptions" differs from the Lockean theory of "ideas" on precisely this point – I argue that for Hume perceptions and experience need not, and perhaps cannot, be private in one highly important sense. I consider Hume's views on perception and experience not only by reading the sections on these topics in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry,* but also by referring to further sections in both works and to the essay "Of the Standard of Taste". On the account of perception and experience I present, Hume is seen to be claiming that the experience necessary for a just or adequate conception of facts -- in both the empirical and the moral domain -- must always be the *extended experience* of someone who has a historical point of view. I argue too that it is precisely this historical point of view that Hume adopts for framing his science of human nature.

Chapter 1

Historical pyrrhonism and the problems of empirical knowledge

1.1 Facts and history

Recent work by Lorraine Daston, Steven Shapin, Barbara Shapiro and Peter Dear[1] has shown that notions like "fact," "probability", "experience" and "experiment", notions crucial to the conceptual repertoire of modern science and philosophy, were derived by early modern philosophers and scientists from the much less "revolutionized" disciplines of law and history. I draw here on their findings in order to advance the claim that Hume's understanding of what an empirical fact is must be considered against the background of the seventeenth and eighteenth century understanding of that concept. Specifically, I argue that the key notions that make up Hume's account of empirical knowledge are to be understood in the light of a debate about the possibility of having objective knowledge in history, a debate that took place from the mid-seventeenth century and continued throughout eighteenth century. This discussion is also meant to suggest that acknowledging the importance of a legal-historical conception of facts in the context of Hume's philosophy permits us to revise some common assumptions about Hume's "empiricism."

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[1] Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988); Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-century England : a Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

As the Oxford English Dictionary shows, the meaning of "fact" current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was of "a thing done or performed", or of "an action, deed, course of conduct." At present, the word has typically a quite different meaning: "a thing that is known to have occurred, to exist, or to be true" and also "a datum of experience" (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The earlier use of "fact" was thus restricted to actions and, specifically, human deeds, and was neutral as to whether the deed occurred. The contemporary meaning of "fact" points to an event known to have occurred. In her recent book, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720*, Barbara Shapiro shows how the philosophical and scientific use of "fact" in early-modern England was derived from its main legal and historical connotation. In the legal use of the period, the term "fact" indicated an action or deed that needed to be established. As did the Roman canon law, so did English Common Law distinguish between matters of fact *(quid facti)* and matters of law *(quid juri)*, but, unlike the former, the English legal system committed the judging of matters of fact and matters of law to two separate institutions: the jury and the judge.[2] The jury's task was to establish the fact by hearing testimony and weighing evidence. Once the fact was established, it was the task of the judge to determine what rule of law applied to it.

> "Fact" in this context implied a human deed or action which had occurred in the past and which had to be substantiated or proved to the satisfaction of the jurors, who were "judges of the fact." The "fact" or "matter of fact" was not considered "true" or suitable to be believed until satisfactory evidence had been presented. A "matter of fact" was an issue placed before a jury as to whether a particular person had performed a particular act or set of acts. "Fact" in the legal context therefore did not mean an established truth but an alleged act whose occurrence was in contention.[3]

The process of judging of the fact or, rather of establishing it, involved the application of rules permitting one to discriminate between credible and incredible testimony, and

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[2] Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720*, p. 9.

[3] Ibid., p.11.

weigh concurrent testimonies. There were criteria for admitting witnesses that, for example, excluded "children, madmen and idiots" and privileged men over women and men "of quality" over peasants. There were also rules establishing the number of witnesses necessary for establishing the fact and criteria for determining the respective legal force of different types of testimony (e.g. hearsay was less credible than the testimony of direct witnesses). In any event, the notion of "fact", understood in the context of the legal model, had interesting epistemological implications that were soon to make that model appealing to other fields and disciplines. The legal model is one in which the possibility of experiencing singular events and assessing our knowledge claims with respect to them is ruled out *a priori*. Judgment regarding facts implies establishing whether some alleged action occurred in a context in which there was no evidence other than testimony and social rules for evaluating it. Hence the legal model also sometimes conflicts with and sometimes supersedes a model of knowledge anchored in the certainty gathered from sense perception.

This legal model of assessing facts was also closely linked to the practice and methodology of history through multiple communicating vessels. History and law were already linked in the Greco-Roman world, where both depended on rhetoric and, producing only probable knowledge, were also opposed to logic and philosophy. Renaissance Humanists, sharing with the Romans a deep interest in the rhetorical disciplines, played an important role in revitalizing the link between these two disciplines; the more so that the renewed interest in politics that grew with the progressive establishment of modern national states gave an important impetus to historical research into laws, practice and customs as well as into the comparison between them and the traditional Roman-canon. Historians such as Machiavelli, Sarpi, Valla, Bodin, Bacon, and Pufendorf were also jurists.[4] What is crucial to us, however,

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[4] Ibid., pp. 35-37. See also Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, pp. 163-67. The link between history and law was explicitly stated in 1667 by Johann Eisenhart in his *Oratio de conjungendis Jursiprudentiæ et Historiarum studii*, annexed to the second edition of Johan Eisenhart, *De fide historica Commentarius, accesit Oratio de*

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is that history and law shared a common epistemological problem, namely that of ascertaining the reality of reported singular past events and actions of which the only available information came in the form of human testimony.[5]

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conjugendis Jurisprudentiae et Historiarum studii (Helmstadii: 1702). For a brief discussion of Eisenhart's contribution to the debate on historical knowledge, see Borghero, *La Certezza e la Storia: Cartesianesimo, Pirronismo e Conoscenza Storica* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1983), pp. 256-66.

[5] In a highly influential paper, *Ancient history and the Antiquarian*, Arnaldo Momigliano drew attention to the fact that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historians and philosophers relied almost exclusively on written testimony. Non-literary forms of historical evidence, like the antiquarian research on coins and medals, were viewed with contempt as a useless hobby for erudite pedants. Momigliano argues that history only became a serious discipline after historians recognized the importance of the auxiliary sciences in providing evidence on which to base their accounts. It is only after Gibbon and the work of nineteenth-century German historians like Ranke that non-literary evidence became a serious source for historians. See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," in *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966). Typical of the view Momigliano discussed is Voltaire's article, *Histoire*, in the *Encyclopédie*. There Voltaire contends that medals, statues and national ceremonies do not constitute, by themselves, sufficient evidence for establishing historical facts. For these kinds of non-literary evidence most of the time only confirm fables and stories proper to the oral traditions, and can only constitute evidence when there is literary testimony that also attests the same facts: "Les médailles ne sont des témoignages irréprochables que lorsque l'événement est attesté par des auteurs contemporains, alors ces preuves se soutenant l'une par l'autre, constatent la vérité." Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, Ou, Dictionnaire Raisonné Des Sciences, Des Arts Et Des Métiers*, 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1751), 8:224-225. Momigliano's claim, however, has to be nuanced, for many scholars and philosophers did already in the seventeenth century use non-literary evidence, as chorographies and other forms of non-narrative histories show. A natural philosopher such as Edmund Halley indulged himself in antiquarian research and praised the use of inscriptions and coins, as we see from a paper, published in the *Philosophical Transactions,* in which he praises "the great utility of Coins to illustrate Matters of History." See E. Halley, "Some Account of the Ancient State of the City of Palmyra, with Short Remarks upon the Inscriptions Found there," *Philosophical Transactions* 19 (1695-1697): p.165. In fact, Momigliano's claim holds good only with respect to standard historical narratives of the period that more or less respect the canon of Roman historians, but historiographical work in the early-modern period was not limited to that genre. For criticisms of Momigliano's

Far from being a localized phenomenon, the legal-historical mode of understanding "facts" was imported into those disciplines dealing with natural "facts." Shapiro suggests that the work of Bacon was an important milestone in the process of adopting the legal-historical language in the investigation of nature. Early-modern scholars distinguished between *verum*, that which concerns the works of God, and *factum*, that which concerns human deeds. They subsumed natural phenomena under the former and moral phenomena under the latter. An understanding of nature as the work of God was thus to be contrasted with an understanding of the human deeds in disciplines like morals, history, and law insofar as the latter were confronted with the problem of establishing the truth by means of a socially regulated procedure of weighing testimonies. Bacon's originality, in this respect, was to apply the methods and concepts proper to the disciplines dealing with *facta* to the disciplines studying natural phenomena.[6] Recent work by Peter Dear shows that the use of a court of law metaphor in the natural sciences was also common among French scholars less likely to be influenced by the Baconian program. Mersenne, for example, appealed to the use of witnesses to validate experiences.[7]

It is also important to remember here that "history" was used by humanists like Bodin as an all-encompassing label for any type of knowledge, in such a way as to signify what is common to sacred, natural and civil histories, each of which is an "account of things."[8] Thomas Hobbes drew on this wider notion of history to specify what is,

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thesis see Mark Salber Phillips, "Reconsiderations on History and Antiquarianism: Arnaldo Momigliano and the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, no. 2 (1996), Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, p. 51.

[6] Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, pp. 106-07

[7] Dear, *Discipline & Experience*, pp. 132.-33.

[8] Jean Bodin, *Methodus Ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* (Paris: 1566). There is an English translation available: Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. Beatrice Reynolds (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

according to him, "knowledge of fact." The latter, he contends, is "nothing else but Sense and Memory, and is *Absolute Knowledge*; as when we see a Fact doing, or remember it done," and, he adds, this "is the knowledge required in a Witnesse."[9] Moreover, Hobbes also claims that all knowledge of facts is "history":

> The Register of *Knowledge of Fact* is called *History*. Whereof there be two sorts: one called *Naturall History*; which is the History of such Facts, or Effects of Nature, as have no Dependance on Man's *Will;* Such as are the Histories of *Metals, Plants, Animals, Regions,* and the like. The other is *Civil History;* which is the History of Voluntary Actions of men in Common-wealth.[10]

In addition, the generalization of the historical-legal way of ascertaining facts to all the "empirical" disciplines also involved the importation of the specific epistemological problems attached to any testimony-dependent area of knowledge. For that reason, any serious threat to the viability of historical knowledge was perceived, by an increasing number of scholars of the period, as a threat to the whole enterprise of grounding both natural and moral philosophy on observation and experience.

1.2 Historical pyrrhonism

Such a threat was real and had a name: *historical pyrrhonism*. However, to define what historical pyrrhonism consisted in, or to single out the typical commitments that make an author a historical pyrrhonist is a difficult task. Like our contemporary term "relativist", the label "historical pyrrhonist" was widely used to dismiss someone else's views, while no one was eager to claim to be a historical pyrrhonist. One way to obtain a more or less satisfactory definition of the term would be to list the charges made when claiming someone was guilty of historical pyrrhonism. This does not completely clarify the issue, for some of those accused of being historical pyrrhonists

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[9] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 147.

[10] Ibid., p.148.

responded to these accusations by claiming that their writings were in fact responses to *pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*. Nonetheless, this way of proceeding reveals several important features of historical pyrrhonism, and provides us with significant points of reference. Any of the following activities were likely to be described or denounced as exemplifications of "historical pyrrhonism".[11]

    (1) Attempting to undermine the claims of the canonical histories, either sacred or civil.

    (2) Claiming that there cannot be knowledge of history and hence that we should suspend judgment about all historical facts.

    (3) Claiming that there cannot be *certain* knowledge of history and hence that we should proportion our belief in historical facts to the degree of evidence at our disposal.

    (4) Claiming that ancient history is unreliable, for ancient historians confound historical facts with fables, myths and doubtful oral traditions.

    (5) Claiming that modern history is unreliable, for contemporary historians are biased and do not have the distance required to acquire an impartial point of view.

    (6) Claiming that the credibility of any given history decays as it passes through long chains of testimony.

    (7) Submitting accepted historical facts to rigorous critical scrutiny by assessing and weighing testimony.

Looking to these several activities or definitions it is easy to see why it is so difficult to characterize historical pyrrhonism. One can see, for example, that someone being accused of historical pyrrhonism because he is committed to (3) could very well

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[11] For general surveys of historical pyrrhonism see Borghero, *La Certezza e la Storia: Cartesianesimo, Pirronismo e Conoscenza Storica*, Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian.", Richard H. Popkin, "Skepticism and the Study of History," in *David Hume: Philosophical Historian*, ed. David Fate Norton & Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), Meta Scheele, *Wissen und Glaube in der Geschichtswissenschaft: Studien zum Historischen Pyrrhonismus in Frankreich und Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1930).

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protest that, on the contrary, claiming (3) is in fact a way of saving history from the dangers of historical pyrrhonism understood as (2). Likewise, to challenge the credibility of ancient history (4) was seen by some as a way of saving the respectability of modern critical history (3) from the ferocious attacks of historical pyrrhonists claiming either (1) or (2). It appears, by the way, that claim (1) can only be meant as an *ad hominem* dismissal, for, from this perspective, almost every serious scholar in the modern period who was not a stubborn dogmatist and a zealous believer would deserve to be treated as a historical skeptic.

1.2.1 François La Mothe Le Vayer

The most likely candidate for the title of standard-bearer of historical pyrrhonism is François La Mothe Le Vayer (1588-1672), a well-known French *libertin érudit* and skeptic.[12] La Mothe's interest in history was in tune with his anti-rationalistic stance so typical of other Renaissance skeptics. Against the seventeenth-century fever for the application of mathematics to natural sciences, he contended that their use in the alien contexts of physics and morals constitutes a likely threat to the these fields:

> Certainly, we should beware lest our usual preference [*coutume*] for self-evident demonstrations, such as those of mathematics, leads us to

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[12] This is also the opinion of Meta Sheele in *Wissen und Glaube in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, p. 22. References to La Mothe le Vayer's writings will be indicated O, vol, IV, part II , page number, and refer to François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Oeuvres de François de la Mothe le Vayer* (Dresde: M. Groell, 1756). Further discussion of La Mothe le Vayer's works can be found in Borghero, *La Certezza e la Storia*, pp. 57-83, Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irresolution: Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itineraires sceptiques*, (Paris: Honore Champion, 2001), Philippe Joseph Salazar, *"La divine sceptique": ethique et rhetorique au 17e siecle : autour de La Mothe Le Vayer, Etudes litteraires francaises, 68* (Tubingen: G. Narr, 2000).

reject in physics, in morals or elsewhere, conclusions that, despite not being as clear, are nonetheless good and acceptable. [13]

La Mothe Le Vayer's first historical work was his *Discours de l'histoire* (1638), a work devoted to the criticism of a history of Charles V by the Spanish historian Prudencio de Sandoval.[14] Although his criticism already showed a pyrrhonian inclination, La Mothe Le Vayer only insisted that bad history shows how necessary it is to set clear rules for good historical writing.[15] In this respect, La Mothe's *Discours* only follows the Renaissance tradition of rhetorical manuals for history, manuals that repeat the consecrated formulae that history is the teacher of life and that it is philosophy teaching by example.[16] If the *Discours* did not introduce much novelty in its consideration of history, it was nevertheless already adamant on some rules that may affect the credibility of works of history as sources of knowledge. La Mothe complained about the lack of chronological order that most histories manifest for "Chronology is a thread even more necessary for finding one's way in a historical narrative, than was the thread, which enabled Theseus to extricate himself from the twists and turns of the Labyrinth."[17]

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[13] "Il est vrai, qu'il est à craindre que la coutume à des demonstrations évidentes, comme sont celles des Mathématiques, ne nous fasse rejetter dans la Physique, dans la Morale, ou ailleurs, des conclusions, qui pour n'avoir pas tant de clarté, ne laissent pas d'être bonnes & recevables." La Mothe le Vayer *Lettre CXLVI, De l'étude des mathématiques,* O, VII, II, p. 208.

[14] François La Mothe Le Vayer, *Discours de l'histoire au Cardinal Duc de Richelieu* in O, IV, I, pp. 273-396.

[15] "Il importe pourtant au public, que le mensonge & l'imposture ne passent pas pour des verités historiques" *Discours de l'histoire,* O, IV, I, p. 277.

[16] "L'Histoire donc qui prend le soin de nous conserver tant de beaux exemples, semble avoir bien merité sur toute autre science, ce beau titre qu'on lui donne de maitresse de nôtre vie." *Discours de l'histoire* O, IV, I, pp. 282-283.

[17] My translation of: "la Chronologie est un filet plus nécessaire à se démêler d'une narration historique, que ne fut jamais à Thesée celui qui le tira de tous les détours du Labyrinthe." *Discours de l'histoire,* p. 294.

In 1646, La Mothe le Vayer published his *Préface pour un ouvrage historique*, a work in which the pyrrhonian themes come to the fore.[18] Although in the *Préface* he still insists in laying down rhetorical rules for historical writing, La Mothe devotes an important part of this work to examining whether the old maxim that historians must tell the truth should still be retained. It is easy to see, he argues, that historians are persons with points of view and who are thus likely to be driven by personal and political interests and human passions. La Mothe contends that even in the best of the possible scenarios, where an impartial historian is the eye-witness of an event, we should not forget that it is impossible to write a history without the help of others: a general of an army could not account for all the events of a battle without relying on the reports of others; for it is impossible for him to be everywhere in the battle and to penetrate the intentions of his enemies.[19] In other words, according to La Mothe, it is impossible to become an ideal observer of history, and thus we cannot escape the burden of dealing with the testimony of others. For that reason, to require that history tell only the truth would be to require too much:

> I have to acknowledge that truth is a quality so necessary to all kinds of history that histories without it could not but be contemptible. But I deny that truth is so essential to them that the smallest intrusion of falsehood would destroy them completely -- as do those who would have us take too seriously the rule of Polybius. For if we should so interpret [Polybius], it should be easy to go on to show that, apart from sacred history, there is no history in the world, as Vopiscus says, where the imperfection of our humanity is not revealed by the presence of some falsehood.[20]

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[18] François La Mothe le Vayer, *Préface pour un ouvrage historique,* O, IV, II, pp. 281-310.

[19] Ibid. pp. 287-288.

[20] Ibid. pp. 288-289. My translation of: "J'avoüe bien que cette vérité est une qualité si requise en toute sorte d'Histoires, qu'il n'y en a point qui ne soit méprisable sans elle. Mais je nie, qu'elle soit tellement de leur essence, que le moindre mélange du mensonge les détruise absolument, comme l'entendent ceux, qui veulent qu'on prenne trop à la rigueur la similitude de Polybe. En effet, s'il falloit l'interpréter de la façon, il

The *Préface pour un ouvrage historique* reflects a commitment to a moderate version of historical pyrrhonism that is close to (3), namely, to the claim that there cannot be *certain* knowledge of history and that to save history from radical skepticism we should give up unjustified expectations about its truth. Later on, however, La Mothe le Vayer will evolve to the much more radical stance of (2), i.e. the claim that there cannot be knowledge of history and that we should suspend judgment about all historical reports. That claim is to be found in his *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire*, a text composed four years before his death in 1668.[21] In the opening lines of this text, La Mothe le Vayer repeats the argument that he had advanced in the *Préface*, namely, that it is impossible to abide by Polybius's rule that history must always tell the truth. This, he owns, is not an extremely controversial claim. However, he wants to "push much further" his argument and to make it clear that "there is almost no certainty at all in what the most famous past historians have told us and that it is likely that those that will embrace this profession in the future will not do much better in all their enterprises."[22]

La Mothe le Vayer claims (4), i.e. that ancient history is totally unreliable because ancient historians mixed attested facts with fables and lies and violated all the rules of chronology. Paradigmatic cases, in his opinion, are all the contradictory reports about the siege of Troy. These reports show that "there is barely anything true in all the

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seroit aisé de prouver en suite, qu'il n'y auroit du tout point d'Histoire au Monde, si l'on excepte la Sacrée, ne se trouvant aucune, selon le dire de Vopiscus, où le defaut de notre humanité ne paroisse par la rencontre de quelque fausseté."

[21] *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire,* O, V, II, pp. 441-480.

[22] *Du peu de certitude,* O, V, II, p. 444, My translation of. "Jusques là je pourrois me promettre, de ne trouver pas beaucoup de contradicteurs: mais je prétens pousser bien plus outré mon raisonnement, & faire reconnoitre manifestement, qu'il n'y a Presque nulle certitude en tout ce que débitent les plus fameux Historiens, que nous aions eûs jusqu'ici, & que vraisemblablement ceux, qui prendront la même occupation à l'avenir, ne reüssiront guéres mieux en toutes leurs entreprises."

narratives of this fabulous siege."[23] This criticism is directed not only at accounts of very remote events, but includes such "less ancient" histories as those dealing with Alexander's campaigns. Although these histories are apparently less doubtful because they were written by historians contemporary to the events, La Mothe le Vayer tells us that even Alexander was disgusted with the exaggerations that his appointed historian Aristobulus introduced in order to flatter his master. After listing other examples of falsities or distortions made by historians contemporary to the events, La Mothe le Vayer claims that "there are thousands similar in history, that show that everything in it is very doubtful."[24] Neither does modern history escape from La Mothe le Vayer's skeptical challenge (cf. 3). Even the date of the fall of Constantinople, he complains, is the object of contradictory reports.[25] The fact is, he argues, that historians, even the most objective ones, have necessarily a perspective on the events they report. The history of the conquest of Gaul would be significantly different had we the written testimony of Vercingetorix and not only that of Cæsar.[26] In sum, the modern historian, like the ancient one, is open to the same skeptical charges:

> If in writing he relies on the testimony and faith of others, could he not
> be misled by the thousands of false reports that, because of the malice
> or the ignorance of men, pass as true? And if he restricts himself to the
> exposition of those important events that he can claim to have seen and
> to have acted a part in, who can ensure that love or hatred, interest or
> fear, or so many other passions, of which no one can claim to be
> exempt, have not corrupted his integrity and his judgment, sometimes
> even without his being aware of it?[27]

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[23] Ibid. p. 447. My translation of: "[I]l n'y a guères de vérité dans toute la narration de ce siege fabuleux."

[24] Ibid. p. 453. My translation of: "Je ne rapporte pas là un exemple solitaire, il y en a mille semblables dans l'Histoire, qui font voir, que tout y est fort douteux."

[25] Ibid. p. 456.

[26] Ibid. p. 462.

[27] Ibid. p. 467. My translation of : "S'il écrit sur le rapport & sur la foi d'autrui, n'a-t-il pas été sujet à être trompé, par mille fausses relations que la malice ou l'ignorance

La Mothe le Vayer ends his text with a radical claim. He thinks that of all the kinds of histories, civil, natural and sacred, only the latter is free from the skeptical doubts he raises.[28] By making this bold claim, he implies that we should suspend our judgment about every report that comes to us from human testimony, even by direct witnesses. Sacred history remains untouched because it is not subject to the same kind of examination. To doubt of sacred history would be to commit an impious act, for these histories do not come to us by way of human testimony, but are received "from the Heavens" through revelation.[29] Whether La Mothe le Vayer is sincere in preserving sacred history from skeptical attack is a matter of controversy, but, in any event, he is eloquent about the distinction between testimony and revelation as sources of belief.

It is important to note that by including natural history in the scope of his pyrrhonian argument, La Mothe le Vayer shows that an epistemological evaluation of testimony was of central importance to any account of our belief in empirical facts -- facts that, in the language of the period, are both natural and strictly historical. Despite his radical historical pyrrhonism, La Mothe le Vayer ends his text on a positive note. Something can be done to remedy the inescapable pyrrhonism that history educes: in order to achieve at least in part the ideal of impartiality, the historian must address himself to future generations. One should "never write the history of one's own century with the aim of showing it to this same century. One should have no regard for present times but only to the future, and disregarding almost completely the living contemporaries that are mentioned in the body of the book, write only for the sake of

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des hommes fait passer pour véritables. Et s'il n'expose, que les choses, qu'il peut soutenir avoir vûës, & y être intervenu comme Acteur, & par des emplois considérables; qui s'assurera que l'amour, ou la haine, l'intérêt, ou la crainte, & tant d'autres Passions, dont personne n'a droit de se dire exemt, n'aient jamais corrompu sa probité & son jugement, quelquefois même sans qu'il s'en soit apperçu."

[28] Ibid. pp. 475-476.

[29] Ibid. p. 476.

posterity, which must pronounce an equitable judgment on one's work."[30] The interesting feature of this last advice by La Mothe is that he seems to suggest that someone who has a historical sense, that is, someone who judges past events but sees herself being judged by contemporaries and future generations, is someone who frees herself to some extent from the gaze of her contemporaries and at the same time is someone who sets constraints on her own partiality. To have a historical sense requires one to place one self before a kind of transhistorical tribunal in which our actions and judgments are constrained by the obligation we have towards past, present and future generations. Though imperfect, this is the only warrant of objectivity available for historians.

1.2.2 Pierre Bayle

The other major seventeenth-century exponent of historical pyrrhonism is, of course, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*[31] was originally

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[30] Ibid. p. 478, My translation of: "Le vrai moien de ne pas tomber dans un si grand inconvenient, est de n'écrire jamais l'Histoire de son siécle pour la faire voir du même siécle, n'aiant jamais égard au tems présent, mais au futur seulement, & ne considérant presque pas ceux qui vivent souvent, & dont l'on parle dans le corps de l'ouvrage, au prix de la postérité, qui doit prononcer un jugement équitable sur nôtre travail."

[31] The first edition of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* is the Rotterdam edition of 1697. Bayle added more material in the second edition (1702) but the standard edition (Amsterdam, 1730) includes posthumous notes and writings meant to be included in the work. I will refer to the following edition: Pierre Bayle and Pierre Desmaizeaux, *Dictionaire historique et critique*, 5e éd., revue, corrigée et augmentée avec la vie de l'auteur par Mr. Des Maizeaux. ed. (Amsterdam: Compagnie des libraires, 1740). The 1740 edition copies the 1730 edition and preserves its pagination. Two English translations of the *Dictionnaire* were available in the eighteenth century (London: C. Harper D. Brown, 1710 and London: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1734). Richard Popkin has published important excerpts of Bayle's Dictionary in Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965). References to the Dictionnaire are to the 1740 edition and are indicated as follows: *Dict.*, article name, note, volume number: page number (e.g. *Dict.*, "Mariana", note D, 3:328).

meant to correct the countless errors of Louis Moréri's *Grand dictionnaire historique*, a compilation of facts about history and historical characters. Bayle painstakingly endeavors to show the flaws of Moréri's dictionary by displaying an amazing erudition and a battery of skeptical arguments. Bayle's dictionary is a monumental collection of critically established facts, in the legal-historical sense of that word. Rather than a theory about the critical ascertainment of facts, the *Dictionnaire* constitutes an example of that critical attitude put into practice. At the same time, Bayle's ironic treatment of the blind credulity with which other historians and scholars treated received facts gave a formidable impetus to the independent attitude towards authority and tradition that characterized many philosophies of the Enlightenment. It is not without reason that Bayle's dictionary was considered "the arsenal of the Enlightenment." In this sense, Bayle most adequately represents the strand of historical pyrrhonism I have defined as (7) "the practice of putting accepted historical facts under rigorous critical scrutiny by specific method of weighing testimony."

For a contemporary reader, accustomed perhaps to a conception of history centered on the explanation of structural historical processes, it is amazing to find Bayle writing lengthy critical notes weighing evidence pro and con for what we would call trivia.[32] A case in point is the long note devoted to determine whether a Roman general, Horatius, after repelling the enemy and having the bridge broken behind him, had swum with all his arms across the Tiber without receiving any wound.[33] Bayle claims there is one tradition of respectable historians, Livy and Valerius Maximus, that affirms that Horatius was able to get to the shore unhurt. Other important historians

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[32] On the importance of particular facts in history: "J'avoue que les Historiens modernes sont trop prolixes, & qu'il y en a qui composent plus de volumes sur leur siècle, que Tite Live n'en a composé sur toute la durée de Rome conquérante, depuis sa fondation jusques à César. Mais les Anciens d'autre côté sont trop courts, & il est plus à propos pour notre instruction, qu'on mette trop de particularitez dans une Histoire, que si l'on en suprime trop." "Sur les libelles diffamatoires", *Dict.* 4 :579.

[33] Cf. *Dict.* "Horace (Publius)", note A, 2:789-790.

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like Seneca and Florus do not mention any wound in their account of that battle. However, Dionysius Halicarnasseus affirms that Horatius was wounded in his thigh and that he remained lame all his life. There is evidence from other historians, e.g. Plutarch and Dion Cassius, attesting of a tradition referring to Horatius' wound or to his lameness. The credibility of the historians who deny that Horatius was wounded is enhanced by the fact that they had an interest in paying tribute to the courage of the Roman general, and his deed would have been more dramatic and remarkable had he been wounded. On the other hand, the tradition that affirms that Horatius did receive a wound is well supported by testimony. Bayle contends that in the case of Horatius, we face a situation in which we have no clear means for deciding between two equally respectable traditions of testimony. Worse, there is still another highly regarded historian, Polybius, who claims that Horatius was killed in that battle. Is that an example of the utmost uncertainty of history and particularly of ancient history? Should we recommend a radical historical pyrrhonism as did La Mothe le Vayer? Bayle's answer is more nuanced:

> Shall we conclude from hence, that antient history is so dark, that we know not generally what side to take amongst those who deny, and those who affirm the same things? And that the yea and the no seeming to be equally authorized in matters, wherein it was the easiest thing in the world to know the truth, we may well doubt of the less notable events which the historians have mentioned? Shall we, I say, infer such conclusions? I should rather advise the reader to make use of these observations to fortify his judgment against the custom of reading without attention, and of believing without examination.[34]

Historical pyrrhonism, conceived as a practice of critical examination of facts is not aimed at destroying the credibility of history but, rather, at the more constructive task of developing a critical attitude towards received traditions. Notwithstanding the usual complaints about the obscurity of ancient history, Bayle remains absolutely skeptical

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[34] *Dict.* "Horace (Publius)", note A, 2:790. The quotation is from the 1734 English translation: Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, 2d ed. (London,: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1734), 3:485.

only about oral traditions that are not supported by written testimony contemporary to the events.[35] The practice of doubting and weighing testimony has the beneficial result of training the subject not to receive facts as already given and of developing a skill for establishing facts. The legal-historical conception of facts is also embedded in Bayle's language and in his conception of what an historian is and should do. Bayle thinks, for example, that historians should enjoy a special kind of authority that confers credibility on their reports. In this sense, he subscribes to Seneca's maxim, "Writers of History are dispensed from taking an Oath and producing their Witnesses; their Word is sufficient to procure Credit to what they say."[36] It is not that Bayle thinks that the testimony of historians should not undergo critical scrutiny; neither does he imply that historians never lie or have a special commitment to the truth. But he thinks that in matters of historical testimony, as in society, there must be validating authorities that protect history from unjustified hearsay and defamatory libels and that put an end to controversy by making a judgment about facts. For there is a great risk of doing injustice to past, present, and future people by allowing the proliferation of false allegations and libels in history. The task of writing history should not fall upon every man, but only upon institutionally appointed historians:

> Civil History should be composed only by those whom the sovereign of each state appoints for that purpose, and then it might be presumed that History would not defame people upon false grounds; whereas, as the world goes at present, it distributes punishments and rewards, disgrace and praise, condemnation and absolution, upon the first reports of fame, sophisticated and wrested by a thousand of passions. And what is surprising, is, that the meanest Historian claims the privilege which belongs only to some; he pretends he is not bound to produce his proofs and his witnesses.[37]

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[35] "Un homme qui se tient bien sur ses gardes ne croit guere touchant la vie d'un particulier les traditions de deux siècles : il demande si les faits qu'on conte ont été mis par écrit au tems de leur nouveauté ; & si on lui dit que non, mais que la mémoire d'en est conservée de pere en fils & de vive voix, il sait bien que le Pyrrhonisme est le parti de la sagesse ." *Dict.* "Esope", note B, 2 :402.

[36] *Dict.* "Annat, François", note A, 1:241. Quote from the English edition 1:343.

[37] *Dict.* "Dissertation sur les libelles diffamatoires," 4:581. English translation: 5:748.

Bayle is not ignorant of the fact that official historians are often either biased or censured but he thinks that imperfect rules are better than no rules at all.[38] Historical knowledge for Bayle is not threatened by the impossibility of knowing past events with absolute certainty, neither is it undermined by the fact that it often depends on contradictory testimonies. The real problem lies in the lack of objective criteria and procedures by which knowledge claims about historical facts are justified. Bayle's skeptical stance about the unreliability of historical reports and the multiple flaws that even the best histories present is aimed at revealing the necessity of establishing institutionalized critical practices for judging about facts. In the article "Guevara" Bayle makes that move explicit. There he reports that Guevara, Chronicler of Charles V, was accused of falsifying facts in his historical writing. Guevara is said to have answered that all histories are uncertain. To this Bayle replies:

> It was a poor excuse; for though historical Scepticism were as well grounded as some pretend, yet an author would not be allowed to advance, that Cicero or Cæsar said or did certain things invented by himself. Every body would be obliged to ascribe nothing to them but what is to be found in antient monuments. An author ought not to go by particular rules of his own; he must conform to public rules: but, according to the public laws in point of history, what is proved by the testimony of grave authors is admitted; and whatever a modern writer advances concerning antiquity, without taking it from good historians, is rejected as a fable.[39]

Bayle's historical pyrrhonism is thus to be understood as a practice of critical assessment of facts aimed at purifying history from ills caused to it by prejudice and

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[38]Bayle complains about the censure by princes of the reports of their appointed historians. The historian Geldenhaur, for instance, was obliged to submit his writings to the privy council of Philippe de Bourgogne. Bayle adds that the council censured not only the errors of Geldenhaur's chronicles but also the "indiscretions." "Combien y a-t-il de véritez enfermées dans cette classe de choses! Il faut convenir d'ailleurs qu'un Historien peut rectifier beaucoup de récits quand des personnes d'Etat examinent & corrigent son travail; mais enfin il y a des faits don't ils ne blâment la publication, que parce qu'ils sont véritables." *Dict.*, "Geldenhaur", note L, 2:541-542.

[39] *Dict.*, "Guevara", note D, 2:632. English translation: 3:269.

partisanship. Bayle sets for himself the task of denouncing the *injustice* involved in acquiescing to unregulated practices of establishing facts. At the same time, he claims, learning how to be critical about received reports is a first step towards training the understanding to make more balanced judgments on facts and to awaken people to the necessity of abiding by publicly recognized rules in judging about matters of fact.[40]

1.2.3 History, probability and moral certainty

Richard Popkin's work and the extensive scholarship that it has generated has sufficiently shown the extent to which Hume's philosophy was indebted to the seventeenth century attempt to find a *via media* between radical skepticism and dogmatism.[41] Although there are still some scholars who maintain that Hume was either a radical skeptic or not a skeptic at all, it is generally admitted that many of the features that compose Hume's metaphysical writings draw on the tradition of mitigated skepticism that Popkin and others have characterized as central to the development of modern philosophy. Most of the discussions analyzed by this scholarly literature, however, turn around the classical topics of skepticism, i.e. the existence of the external world, personal identity, and the reliability of reason. For it is assumed that the process of finding solutions to these riddles was crucial to the shaping of the new scientific outlook. I prefer to draw attention to the importance that pyrrhonism about history has in the development of the mitigated form of skepticism that is typical of Hume and other key philosophers of the period. For, although the development of historical pyrrhonism is closely connected to the general project of building a "constructive skepticism", it is nonetheless conceptually independent of

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[40] For further reference to Bayle's understanding of history and the historian's practice see Elizabeth Labrousse, "La méthode critique chez Pierre Bayle et l'histoire," *Revue Internationale de philosophie de Bruxelles* II (1957), Ruth Whelan, *The Anatomy of Superstition : a Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989).

[41] Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

other forms of skepticism. It is possible to be a skeptic about history while remaining anti-skeptical about personal identity, the existence of the external world, the reliability of reason, or the status of morality.

This issue did not escape the attention of Popkin, who has written a remarkable paper on it.[42] But, I think, the relative import of the issue of historical pyrrhonism can now be better measured in the light of the work done on the importance of the legal-historical conception of facts and probability in the period. It may well be the case that the set of arguments raised against the possibility of historical knowledge, given that they are relatively independent of other forms of skeptical arguments, deserve a more important place in the history of mitigated skepticism. If this is so then it may well be that the literature on historical skepticism had more impact on Hume's philosophy than did the forms of mitigated skepticism developed in England in the context of theological controversies.[43]

Historical pyrrhonism of form (3), that there cannot be *certain* knowledge of history and hence that we should proportion our belief in historical facts to the degree of evidence at our disposal, is to a great extent responsive to worries elicited by Descartes' philosophy. Implicit in Descartes' main claims is the view that any science that cannot cite intuitive evidence for warranting knowledge claims can never yield *certain* knowledge. The second rule of Descartes' *Regulæ* expresses clearly the kind of view that became worrisome for many scholars including some Cartesians. The rule

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[42] Popkin, "Skepticism and the Study of History."

[43] I agree in this line of arguing with David Wootton, who makes a similar claim in his "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M.A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 191-229. For the view that religious controversy in seventeenth-century England may have influenced Hume's mitigated skepticism, cf. Henry G. Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963).

Ibid., p. 40.

states that only those objects of which our mind can attain a certain and indubitable knowledge deserve our attention.[44] The model of a truth-finding philosophical science is to be centered, according to Descartes, on the examples of geometry and arithmetic: "in seeking the right path of truth we ought to concern ourselves only with objects which admit as much certainty as the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry."[45]

Even some eminent Cartesians like Arnauld anticipated the disastrous consequences for the moral sciences that a strict Cartesianism might imply, and attempted to rescue moral knowledge from the abyss of uncertainty. They did this by showing that probable knowledge can, in certain circumstances, yield certainty and, for that reason, that the philosophical respectability of the moral sciences can be secured. One resource available to overcome the difficulty was a distinction between types of certainty that had been elaborated in Spanish scholasticism by the theologian, Pedro Hurtado de Mendoza (1578-1651). In his *Disputationes a summulis ad metaphysicam*,[46] Mendoza distinguishes, in what is most likely a development of Aristotle's suggestion that each type of knowledge requires its own kind of evidence, three types of certainty.[47] Hurtado de Mendoza distinguishes:

(1) *Moral evidence*: Evidence, which compels assent according to prudential rules. As an example Hurtado de Mendoza contends that the rules of prudence force us to believe as morally certain the sworn testimony of a man, who our

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[44] René Descartes AT, X, 362.

[45] AT, X, 366. Quotations are from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[46] Pedro Hurtado de Mendoza, *Disputationes a Summulis ad Metaphysicam* (Vallisoleti: Apud Ioannem Godinez de Millis, 1615). Subsequent editions adopted a different title, *Disputationes de Universa Philosophia* , of which there is available a modern reprint (Zug [Switzerland]: Idc, 1987). I was led to Hurtado de Mendoza by Borghero's *La Certezza e la Storia* and helped in understanding the Latin text by Fabienne Pironet.

[47] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1094b.

experience tells us is just and prudent, when the man has no interest in the fact reported.[48]

(2) *Physical evidence*: Evidence that commands assent according to physical principles, as when we infer the existence of a cause from the existence of the effect.[49]

(3) *Metaphysical evidence*: Evidence that obtains when something is conceived so clearly that it is impossible to conceive it otherwise. Such is the case of propositions like "Any thing either exists or it does not exist" (*quodlibet est, vel non est)* or "God exists."[50]

Although the distinction between *degrees* of certainty is already built into the scholastic distinction between types of evidence, the respective degree of certainty that each type yields is not discussed. The distinction roughly matches Aristotle's distinction between demonstrable and probable knowledge, but is silent about whether there is any difference in the certainty of physical and moral evidence.

Natural law philosophers such as Grotius and Pufendorf used the distinction between types of certainty in a similar way. Grotius refers to four ways of proving the truth according to the requirements of the different sciences: one for mathematics, based on arguments of the "utmost certainty"; another for Physics based on "natural principles"; a third in ethics, based on maxims derived from common sense and experience; and finally one for "matters of fact", based on the evaluation of the quality of testimony.[51] Specifically, Grotius contends that were we to reject the kinds of proofs proper to matters of fact, we would destroy the certainty of historical facts.[52]

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[48] Hurtado de Mendoza, *Disputationes a Summulis ad Metaphysicam*, De Anima, Disp.8. Sect. 3, § 9, pp. 748-49.

[49] Ibid., § 11, p. 749.

[50] Ibid., § 16, p. 750.

[51] Hugo Grotius, *Traité de la Vérité de la Religion Chrétienne*, trans. P. Le Jeune (Amsterdam: E.-J.Ledet, 1728), p.175.

[52] Ibid., p. 176.

Similarly, in his *Law of Nature and Nations* (1672), Pufendorf refers to moral certainty as the specific kind of certainty yielded by historical narratives, while suggesting at the same that this kind of proof is particularly fragile:

> The Faith we give to Historians is reckon'd morally certain, when they testify a Thing vastly remote from our Memory and Knowledge, and of which there is no real and demonstrative Proof now extant; and especially, if many agree in the Relation: Because it is not probable that many Persons should join together by Compact, in putting a Trick on Posterity, or should entertain any Hopes, that the Lye would not in Time be discover'd. And yet for all this, if Occasion were, we could produce Examples of many popular Fables that have pass'd through several Ages, under the Colour and Character of Truth.[53]

Henry Van Leeuwen suggests that the Anglican divines, Chillingworth and Tillotson who, in the context of a theological dispute forged the notions of certainty that influenced the *Royal Society* empiricist program, were strongly influenced by Grotius.[54] Tillotson, in particular, reproduces Grotius schema of four types of certainty, but adds three noteworthy variations. The first consists in claiming that absolute certainty is beyond human reach and that even mathematical demonstrations are subject to error. The second involves the blurring of the distinction between metaphysical and physical certainty by claiming that demonstration and sense perception are the highest kind of evidence. He even sometimes speaks of evidence from the senses as "ocular demonstration."[55] By default the third noticeable variation involves placing testimony at the lowest level of the scale of evidence. Hume will remind us of the distinction between evidence from the senses and evidence from testimony in his brief summary of Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation, where Tillotson contends that testimony claiming there is a transformation of the

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[53] Samuel Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations. Eight Books*, trans. Basil Kennett,. (London,: J. Walthoe [etc.], 1729), 1.2.11. I owe this reference to David Norton.

[54] Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought*, p 39.

[55] Ibid., p. 40.

substance of bread in the Eucharist can never overpower the evidence of the senses witnessing that there is only bread before us (EHU, 10.1). The insistence on establishing degrees of certainty and the pairing of sense perception with demonstration is indeed good evidence of the influence that the notion of certainty elaborated by Chillingworth and Tillotson had over such early members of the Royal Society as Glanvill and Boyle. But lowering the degree of certainty that testimony yields is certainly not a good way to overcome Descartes' rejection of morals as a respectable scientific enterprise.

In order to meet Descartes' standard it must be shown that morals is capable of attaining the same level of certainty found in mathematical demonstrations. To meet this challenge, a different distribution of types of certainty appears in French and German debates on evidence and certainty. The common feature of these versions of the levels-of-certainty-distinction is that they

a) tend to blur the distinction between physical and moral certainty and

b) contend that in many cases moral evidence or reasoning reaches as high a level of certainty as geometry and, in some cases, reaches even higher.

The first step in this direction came from within Cartesianism. In the *Port-Royal Logic,* Arnauld and Nicole attempt to secure moral certainty from skeptical attacks for, they believe, it is by testimony that we collect most of our knowledge, far more than we can gather by ourselves, and also because the truth of the Christian religion depends heavily on the reliability of the testimony of the apostles and the historical transmission of revealed truths. The way chosen by the authors of the *Port-Royal Logic* consists in equating evidence gathered from sense-perception with evidence gathered by multiple and convergent testimony:

> When the facts that the senses can easily judge are witnessed by a great number of persons from different times, different nations, and diverse interests, who speak about them as if from personal experience, and who cannot be suspected of having conspired to maintain a lie, they

should be considered as constant and indubitable as if we have seen them with our own eyes.[56]

Arnauld and Nicole even insist that unanimous testimony of the kind described causes our belief in the reported matter of fact to be as certain and indubitable as if it were the product of a mathematical demonstration -- because its falsity is "morally impossible." They admit that it is not always easy to establish when testimony attains such a high degree of certainty as to be compared with sense perception and mathematical demonstration, but some boundaries can be established that trace a limit between "human certainty" and mere probability.[57]

Nicolas Filleau de la Chaise adopted the same line of reasoning in his *Traité qu'il y a des demonstrations d'une autre espece & aussi certaines que celles de la geometrie* first published as an appendix to the 1688 Amsterdam edition of Pascal's *Pensées*.[58] Filleau de la Chaise gave further reasons for tracing a distinction between mere probability and moral certainty by claiming that probability plays no role when there is moral certainty:

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[56]Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, trans. Jill Vance Buroker, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.251.

[57] Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, p. 261.

[58] Nicolas Filleau de la Chaise, "Traité qu'il y a des demonstrations d'une autre espece & aussi certaines que celles de la geometrie," in *Pensées de M. Pascal sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets, qui ont esté trouvées après sa mort parmy ses papiers: édition nouvelle augmentée de beaucoup de pensées, de la vie du même autheur, & de quelques dissertations, marqueés dans la page suivante*, ed. Blaise Pascal (A Amsterdam: chez Abraham Wolfgang, 1688), pp. 111-19. Filleau de la Chaise's treatise was available in English in the same year, as it was also appended to the 1688 English translation of the *Pensées*: *Blaise Pascal et al., Monsieur Pascall's thoughts, meditations and prayers, touching matters moral and divine, as they were found in his papers after his death. Together with a discourse upon Monsieur Pascall's thoughts, wherein is shewn what was his design. As also another discoure on the proofs of the truth of the Book of Moses. And a treatise, wherein is made appear that there are demonstrations of a different nature, but as certain as those of geometry, and that such may be given of the Christian religion* (London,: J. Tonson, 1688).

For however far we can push the difficulty of a given probability -- as, for example, that of a blind person restoring, on his first attempt, one of Cicero's Orations after we had jumbled the characters that compose this and then made him choose these one by one and randomly -- it is certain that, however extravagant this proposal may seem, a man with a profound knowledge of numbers can, given that there is no real impossibility involved, determine exactly what it would be to wager on this matter. But matters of fact are either certain or uncertain. Either there is a city we call Rome, or there is not such a city. Either the city of London has burned, or it has not. There is no wagering on that.[59]

Filleau de la Chaise maintains that a bet is accepted only when the outcome of the game is uncertain, even if the relevant expectations are quantifiable. In the case of whether or not a blind person could restore an oration of Cicero after all the letters have been mixed, we can accept a bet only before seeing the result, for, once we see the result, probability is no more at stake. Likewise, in the case of matters of fact of the kind "Rome exists" or "London has been burned" there is no contest of expectations, for "the things that prove there is a city with this name let us see it as if we had spent our entire life there."[60] Once we have "seen" that Rome exists or that London has been burned, thanks to the unanimous testimony of innumerable witnesses and historians, it would be a folly to even question the certainty of these matters of fact. Now Filleau de la Chaise contends that propositions arrived at by necessity, or,

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[59] *Filleau de la Chaise, "Traité qu'il y a des demonstrations d'une autre espece & aussi certaines que celles de la geometrie,"* p. 113. My translation of: "Car à quelque degré qu'on puisse pousser la difficulté d'un certain hazard. comme, par exemple de faire retrouver du premier coup à un aveugle une Oraison de Ciceron après avoir brouillé les caractères qui la composent, & qu'il prendroit l'un après l'autre au hazard ; il est certain que quoy que cela paroisse extravagant à proposer, un homme profond dans la connoissance des nombres determinera au juste ce qu'il y a à parier en cette occasion, n'y ayant point d'impossibilité réelle que cela ne puisse arriver. Mais pour les choses de fait elles sont seurement, ou ne sont pas. Il y a une ville qu'on appelle Rome, ou il n'y en a point. La ville de Londres a este brûlée, ou elle ne l'a pas esté ; il n'y a point de pari sur cela."

[60] Ibid., p. 114. My translation.

as he puts it, "everything that does not depend on chance", ought to be called demonstrations. Hence, there are different kinds of demonstrations and it is possible to produce demonstrative knowledge by means other than those used in geometry. Moreover, non-geometrical demonstrations can, in certain cases, be more convincing even if we cannot reproduce the steps of the reasoning, as is the case in formal demonstrations. For that reason, Filleau de la Chaise claims that "our certainty that Rome exists is a demonstration of its own kind."[61]

Thus, we can see that the challenge set to the certainty of knowledge derived from testimony by historical pyrrhonism and by Descartes elicited a number of responses aiming at securing the reliability of testimony and, hence, at warranting the philosophical respectability of all the moral disciplines in which testimony plays a central role. A typical theme in all these attempts is the reappraisal of Aristotle's views of prudential reasoning, though with new naturalist and probabilistic flavors. To understand how these views later developed in philosophers like Hume one must understand the distinction between those who assign to testimony a lower degree of certainty than sense-perception, and those who boldly contend that human certainty -- as compared to absolute or divine certainty -- admits of different types but not of substantially different degrees. Some beliefs remain probable, but this is not a feature of the epistemic type to which these beliefs belong, but, rather, the normal result of a lack of convincing evidence. Thus, both in natural and in moral philosophy the distinction between probability and certainty arises independently of the fact that natural and moral beliefs have different sources of warrant (sense perception and testimony).

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[61] Ibid. p. 114. Pierre-Daniel Huet held similar views in Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Petri Danielis Huetii demonstratio evangelica ad serenissimum delphinum* (Parisiis: Apud Stephanum Michallet ... 1679). In Germany, and in the context of a debate on the status of historical beliefs, the view that testimony amounts to demonstration was held by Johann Eisenhart in his *De fide historica Commentarius, accesit Oratio de conjugendis Jurisprudentiae et Historiarum studii.*

1.2.4 The decay of historical credibility

A curious episode in the debate over historical pyrrhonism is the fate of a short passage in Locke's *Essay* in which he advances the thesis I have characterized as (6), namely, that given the long chains of testimony involved in the transmission of historical facts, there is an inescapable decay of historical evidence through time.[62] Doubtless, this argument must bewilder contemporary readers who have the contrary experience of seeing the evidence for ancient history increase by the research done by historians, archeologists, and other ancillary sciences. On behalf of the respectability and seriousness of Locke and all those that took part in this rather curious debate it has to be said that most of the auxiliary sciences that have contributed to the progress of historical research were in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries either non-existent or at barely more than an embryonic stage. As we have seen, crucial to the evaluation of any knowledge claim in the history-dependent moral sciences was the assessment of the epistemic status of the relevant testimony and, in this respect, it is only natural to raise concerns about the reliability of long chains of testimony. Once again, history was to provide the arena in which the historical-legal conception of facts could be tested. If one has to rely on a model of knowledge that draws on the legal metaphor in which the knower, like a juror, becomes a "judge of facts" who has to ascertain what happened by having recourse only to human testimony, then one surely has to be worried about the reliability of long chains of testimony.

Another important feature of Locke's argument and its subsequent discussion by scholars is that it connects the discussion of the problems of testimony and historical evidence with issues being dealt with by philosophers and mathematicians engaged in the task of developing a conceptual framework for understanding probability. This not always harmonious encounter between history, law and probability is everything but

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[62] *Essay*, 4:16.9-10.

contingent. For these three disciplines shared in the early-modern period a common concern for achieving a new understanding of prudential reasoning, i.e. reasoning under conditions of uncertainty, which was viewed as central for an understanding of the practical sciences.

The matter was sufficiently important to gain the attention of the authors of the *Port-Royal Logic*, who devoted the last chapters (probably written by Arnauld) of their work to the problem of ascertaining facts conveyed through human testimony. These chapters are the source of much of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debate on the status of testimony and probable knowledge. For the moment, I will only point out the important transition, suggested by Arnauld, between probable reasoning about past facts and probable reasoning about the future. In the *Logic*, Arnauld contends that the "rules, which are helpful for judging about past events, can easily be applied to future events. For as we ought to believe it probable that an event has happened whenever certain circumstances we know about are ordinarily connected with that event, we also ought to believe that it is likely to happen whenever present circumstances are such that they are usually followed by such an effect."[63] In the case of Arnauld and Nicole, the claim also shows the connection between history, an investigation of past facts, and the arts and sciences requiring predictive abilities. The authors of the *Port-Royal Logic* also contend that in guiding our practical actions we have to be careful to evaluate our expectations by means of some objective method. The mathematics of probability recently developed in the Pascal-Fermat correspondence (1654, but published only in 1679) and in Huygens's *Tractatus de Ratiociniis in Aleæ Ludo* (1656)[64] was a good candidate for the task of achieving an

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[63] Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, p. 273.

[64] Published as an appendix to Frans van Schooten, Apollonius, and Christiaan Huygens, *Francisci à Schooten Exercitationvm mathematicarum libri quinque. I. Propositionum arithmeticarum et geometricarum centuria. II. Constructio problematum simplicium geometricorum. III. Apollonii Pergæi loca plana restituta. IV. Organica conicarum sectionum in plano descriptio. V. Sectiones miscellaneæ*

objective evaluation of expectations: "in order to decide what we ought to do to obtain some good or avoid some harm, it is necessary to consider not only the good or harm in itself, but also the probability that it will or will not occur, and to view geometrically the proportion all these things have when taken together."[65]

Locke's first formulation of the argument on the decay of historical evidence, although it avoids an interpretation of probability making use of the mathematical "doctrine of chances", is explicit enough as to the legal model from which the argument is directly drawn. The argument occurs in the chapter, *Of the Degrees of Assent (Essay* 4.16). After having defined in the precedent section two sources or grounds for probability

a) "The conformity of any thing with our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience" and

b) "The Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience,"[66]

Locke proceeds to show how these two sources of probability yield different degrees of belief. The highest degree of assent, *assurance,* obtains when a reported matter of fact coheres both with our personal experience and knowledge and with "the general consent of all Men, in all Ages, as far as it can be known."[67] That fire warmed a man or iron sank in water are matters of fact commanding our belief with an almost absolute degree of probability. The second degree of probability, *confidence,* obtains when we find that the matter of fact reported is consistent both with our personal experience and observation and with the consent of humanity; but where a contrary report, though highly unlikely, cannot in principle be completely ruled out. Finally, in contingent matters of fact depending entirely on the reliability of the testimony our belief must be proportionate to the evidence yielded by testimony giving room for

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triginta. Quibus accedit C. Hugenii tractatus De ratiociniis in aleæ ludo (Lugd. Batav.,: ex officina Joannis Elsevirii, 1656).

[65] Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking,* pp. 273-74.

[66] *Essay,* 4:15.4-5.

[67] *Essay,* 4:16.6.

"*Belief, Conjecture, Guess, Doubt, Wavering, Distrust, Disbelief*, etc."[68] Otherwise put, where testimony cannot be checked against personal experience the evaluation of the reliability of testimony yields a continuum of degrees of probability, understood as degrees of subjective certainty.

The crucial problems related to an understanding of prudential reasoning are thus to be found in the set of matters of fact deriving almost entirely from testimony, particularly when the reported matters of fact contradict common experience. Locke maintains that in these cases one has to take into account a great variety of factors, such as circumstances, psychological dispositions of the witness, social qualification, motivations. To assess the probability in these cases amounts to a prudential evaluation of the reliability of the testimony in a way that yields different degrees of expectation about the truth of the matter of fact reported. This prudential evaluation of testimony cannot be reduced, Locke claims, "to precise Rules", and this is perhaps the reason why he does not make use of the mathematical "doctrine of chances" to solve the puzzles of testimonial reliability. Locke thinks that legal theory and practice is of more help in this field: "I think, it may not be amiss to take notice of a Rule observed in the Law of *England;* which is, That though the attested Copy of a Record be good Proof, yet the Copy of a Copy never so well attested, and by never so credible Witnesses, will not be admitted as a proof in Judicature."[69] Locke appeals to a relatively recent (for him) rule of law excluding hearsay as evidence in trials. The testimony of a witness who merely reports what someone else has said as well as out-of-court testimony were ruled out on the grounds that hearsay testimony does not lend it self to an evaluation of its reliability nor does it allow for cross-examination. The hearsay rule was a reaction to such abuses as the conviction for treason, by means of

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[68] *Essay,* 4:16.8.

[69] *Essay,* 4:16.10.

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the out-of-court testimony of Lord Cobham, of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1603.[70] Locke

suggests that this legal practice is transferable to all domains in which probability is

established by way of testimony alone and, particularly, to history where the veracity

of almost all matters of fact depends on the reliability of chains of testimony. Locke

claims:

> That any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less
> force and proof it has. The Being and Existence of the thing it self, is
> what I call the original Truth. A credible Man vouching his Knowledge
> of it, is a good proof: But if another equally credible, do witness it from
> his Report, the Testimony is weaker; and a third that attests the Hear-
> say of an Hear-say, is yet less considerable. So that in traditional Truths,
> each remove weakens the force of the proof: And the more hands the
> Tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and
> evidence does it receive from them.[71]

For any given matter of fact there is an "original truth." That original truth not being

something accessible by intuition, it follows that eyewitness testimony, when the

witness is a reliable one, can at most amount to good "proof" because it is based on a

sure ground of probability, namely, direct observation and experience. Without

standing at the same level as the "original truth", direct testimony, when the reliability

of the witness can be established, amounts to certainty. But any subsequent testimony

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[70]As an appetizer for my treatment of Hume's views on testimony and history it is
interesting to note what Hume has to say about Raleigh's trial in his *History of
England.* Concerning the plot against James I in which Raleigh supposedly took part,
Hume maintains: "Everything still remains mysterious in this conspiracy; and history
can give us no clue to unravel it" (H, 5:8). Hume remained suspicious about the
validity of the accusation, although, he admits, the memoirs of some of the actors of
that drama provide further evidence to support the conjecture that Raleigh did take
part in a plot. But, given the evidence available during the trial there is no doubt about
the unfairness of it: "[Raleigh] was accused by Cobham alone, in a sudden fit of
passion . . . . This accusation Cobham afterwards retracted; and soon after, he
retracted his retractation. Yet upon the written evidence of this single witness, a man
of no honour or understanding, and so contradictory in his testimony; not confronted
with Raleigh; not supported by any concurring circumstance; was that great man,
contrary to all law and equity, found guilty by the jury" (H 5:9).

[71] *Essay,* 4: 16.10.

based on this initial testimony is doomed to diminish the credibility of the report, for "Passion, Interest, Inadvertency, Mistake of his Meaning, and a thousand odd Reasons, or Caprichio's, Men's Mind are acted by . . . may make one Man quote another Man's Words or Meaning wrong."[72] So Locke's argument establishes an important distinction between first- and second-hand witnesses and contends that subsequent testimony based on a single direct witness report can only diminish the credibility of the testimony.

Locke clearly understands the pyrrhonian implications of his own argument, for he says that he "would not be thought to lessen the Credit and use of *History*." He acknowledges the value and use of history as well as the fact that we have nothing other than chains of testimony to rely on, but "Truth it self forces me to say, That no *probability* can arise higher than its first Original."[73]

The full force of the pyrrhonian implications of the argument came from a rather strange interpretation of it by a Scots mathematician and theologian, John Craig (or Craige) (1662-3?-1731). Craig published in 1699 a curious treatise whose title is

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[72] *Essay*, 4: 16.11.

[73] Ibid. I cannot here discuss the soundness of Locke's argument, but the reader may gather that there is much to suspect about it. C.A.J Coady has recently discussed it at length and pointed out some obvious problems. One noticeable weakness of the argument is that it assumes that tradition involves the repetition of a single testimony. In assuming this rather simplistic view of what a historical chain of testimony is Locke overlooks the fact that in history we usually have different chains of testimony attesting independently the veracity of an event. As long as we have different sources there is available to us the possibility of *corroborating* the facts reported. Hence, when there are concurrent chains of testimony the probability of history may increase. Also, assuming a more complex picture of historical chains of testimony involves also a different appreciation of the role of each witness in the chains. Coady suggests that in oversimplifying the system of transmission of historical evidence Locke also fails to notice that each witness in the chain is not merely a passive transmitter of the content of the initial testimony, but an active judge of the testimony who decides whether or not he endorses it. See C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 199-223.

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already very telling: *Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica.*[74] As this title clearly indicates, Craig was a convinced Newtonian and, though his *Principia Mathematica* may suggest the contrary, he was also a respected mathematician.[75] In his *Principia* Craig sets out to give two "geometrical" arguments for establishing the Christian religion. The first, attempts to provide us with a calculus for establishing the credibility of the Christian teachings, while the second attempts to show the high probability that there is a future life and, thus, the rationality of preferring the pleasure of eternal happiness to the immediate pleasures of the worldly life. As can be gathered, the second argument constitutes an idiosyncratic variant of Pascal's wager. I will here focus on the first argument, which establishes rules for calculating the probability of historical credibility. As strange as it may seem, the goal of the argument is to provide a thorough calculation of the diminishing rate of credibility in history in order to establish when exactly the evidence for Christianity will be so weak that faith will disappear from earth. Against the millenarians' expectations that the Second Coming will be soon, Craig's work "establishes" that the return of the Messiah cannot occur before AD 3150. Craig's concludes that for "Christ to come, 1454 years must first elapse. For it is necessary first that the probability of history

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[74] John Craig, *Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica* (Londini: Typis Johannis Darby and Impensis Timothei Child ... 1699). A first English version of some excerpts of Craig's *Principia* appeared as a *Beiheft* of the journal *History and Theory* as *Craig's Rules of Historical Evidence from Joannis Craig "Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica" (1699)*, trans. anon. ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1964). A complete and, I think, more accurate translation has been provided by Richard Nash as an appendix to his instructive essay on Craig. See Richard Nash, *John Craige's Mathematical Principles of Christian Theology*, Journal of the History of Philosophy monograph series. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

[75] Nash reports that Craig was acquainted with Newton, and that the latter gave Craig some of his manuscripts. Craig is also reported to have met, at Newton's home, Edmond Halley and Abraham DeMoivre. Craig was also one of the first to understand and to use Newton's calculus of fluxions and the first to introduce in England the Leibnizian notation for the differential calculus. See Nash, *John Craige's Mathematical Principles of Christian Theology*, pp. 8-18.

must disappear, but that will come to pass when 1454 years have elapsed since our time (= 3150 - 1696); therefore, for him to come, 1454 years must elapse from our present time. Q.E.D."[76] The premise that for Christ to come the probability of history must disappear is "founded" in an interpretation of Luke 18:8, where Christ is reported to say: "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on Earth?"[77]

Craig's general aim is formulated in a rather cryptic slogan: "to demonstrate [the] probability [of Christianity]."[78] The slogan is puzzling because it was a common understanding in the modern period that probability theory was an attempt to come to terms with non-demonstrable knowledge. A charitable reading will suggest that Craig means merely that probability can be dealt with objectively by using mathematical tools in order to produce more than merely random guesses. But there is something very special about the way Craig undertook to give a mathematical form to Locke's argument. Craig seems to ignore the resources of mathematical probability and endeavours, rather, to proceed by what has all the appearance of being an application of Newton's calculus of fluxions.

With respect to the argument about historical probability Craig first lays down a number of definitions strongly Lockean in character. He defines probability as the appearance of agreement or disagreement between two ideas, where the connection between them is not certain. "Natural probability" is probability as it conforms to our observation and experience and "historical probability" is that which comes from human testimony. To these definitions he adds two more of a resolutely Newtonian flavour:

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[76] Ibid., p. 70.

[77] Quoted by Craig in Ibid.

[78] Ibid., p. 53.

a) "Suspicion of historical probability is a moving of the mind toward contrary versions of history."

b) "Velocity of suspicion is the force by which the mind at a certain time is driven as if through a kind of space toward contrary versions of history."[79]

Craig also presupposes as a general hypothesis, "All men have an equal right to be believed unless the contrary has been somehow established", because he thinks that "it is a common practice of mankind, in any business transacted in this life to accept any man as a witness unless he has somehow lost this natural right."[80]

The next step is to represent the problem of the credibility of history as the result of the opposing forces of probability and suspicion. Craig expresses this result by means of the following formula:

$$P = x + (m - 1)s + K + Q \ [81]$$

In this equation P represents the outcome probability; x the input probability, i.e., the addition of all the probabilities yielded by direct witnesses of a given event; m represents the number of indirect witnesses involved in the chain; s the standard suspicion yielded by an ideal witness. So, we have first in the formula a calculation of the initial probability x plus an amount of suspicion generated by a number of witness $m-1$, that is, excluding the last witness who is only a passive receiver of the story. K expresses the suspicion as it is a function of the time elapsed since the original testimony and the "velocities of suspicion." Craig represents time with a straight line (t) and holds that if we dispose all the witnesses A, B . . . F (see diagram below) so as

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[79] Ibid., p. 55.

[80] Ibid., p. 56.

[81] Ibid., p. 66. For the purposes of this brief summary of Craig's thesis I offer here a simplified version of the formula. Craig's actual formula is $P = x + (m - 1)s + T^2k/t^2 + D^2q/d^2$, where T is the total time elapsed; t any given segment of T; k the known suspicion/time at t; D the total distance; d a given segment of D and q the known suspicion/space at d. See Ibid., p. 61.

to place them as points defining equal segments of time we will see that the "velocity of suspicion" generated by each of them, i.e. the perpendicular vectors (v) originating in the time-axis, increase in arithmetical progression. By tracing a straight line uniting the extremities of all these vectors with the point representing the original eyewitness, a triangle *AFf* is formed. Craig contends that the area of that triangle represents the suspicion of a history as it is a function of the time elapsed. Now, given that the "velocities of suspicion" increase in arithmetical progression, each of the triangles generated by a new witness (equidistant in time) will increase in square ratio the "area" of suspicion. A similar calculus is produced to represent the suspicion, as it is a function of space.
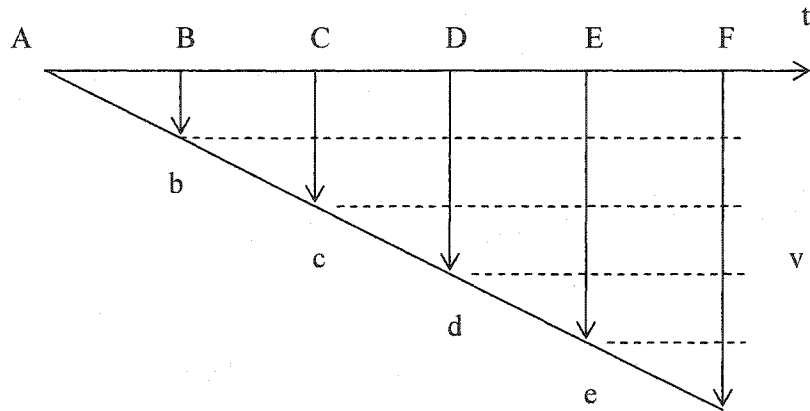
Now, given that the original probability remains constant and that the suspicion grows with the number of witnesses and the time and distance elapsed, it follows that the credibility of any given history decays at a knowable rate. The probability of Christian history, if transmitted orally, can only last, according to his calculus, eight centuries.[82] However, Craig admits that the decay of credibility is much lower when history is transmitted through written testimony, for which case he produces a special variant of his formula. The final result is that the evidence for the Christian religion will be negligible at AD 3150.

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[82] Ibid., p. 66.

Until recently, historians of probability had treated Craig as a "crank" and condemned him for the bizarreness of the very idea of calculating the credibility of histories, and especially, for using such a weird geometry of probability while the first tools of probability calculus were already available to him.[83] Recent work, however, has shown that Craig's argument, although it may be bizarre, is nonetheless revealing of the concerns over the role that history and testimony had for an understanding of the kind of prudential rationality that was deemed to be relevant for the new understanding of morals.[84] Mathematizing morals was in fact a very common enterprise, and scholars like Jakob Bernoulli, Laplace, Montmort, Bayle, Hume, Warburton and Samuel Clarke, among many others, spent time discussing Craig's argument. Titles like "Political Arithmetick" or "Moral Arithmetic" were not unusual even in the last decades of the seventeenth century.[85] Nor was the idea that knowledge of the laws of human nature could help to produce mathematical models of decision and action. In this sense, Craig's use of a "Newtonian" approach to historical probability can be interpreted, as Nash suggests, as an attempt to understand probability deductively rather than inductively, and does not rest on an ignorance of the doctrine of chances as many have insinuated. Craig's puzzling claim that he was seeking to "demonstrate the probability" of Christianity can then be understood in the light of the various attempts to show that there is demonstrable knowledge in the

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[83] For a collection of criticism raised against Craig's eccentricity, see Nash's Introduction to his translation of Craig, Ibid.

[84] Besides Richard Nash's commentary, interesting discussions of Craig's impact on the development of probability and on the theory of evidence in history can be found in Borghero, *La Certezza e la Storia*; Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment*; Stephen M. Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[85] Cf. for example Buffon's *Arithmétique morale* in v. 12 of Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes de Buffon : avec la nomenclature Linnéenne et la classification de Cuvier* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1855). See also William Petty Knight, "An Extract of Two Essays in Political Arithmetick concerning the Comparative Magnitudes, etc.", *Philosophical Transactions* 16 (1686-1692).

moral domain.[86] Craig's use of a fluxional approach to probability expresses then the will to show that, even in situations of uncertainty, inferences can be drawn with demonstrative force if one accepts the nomological character of a number of empirical generalizations about human nature. If we pay attention to Craig's formula it also becomes clear that once the velocity of suspicion generated by an ideal witness is assumed, the crucial factor for the diminishing rate of credibility is essentially a function of the flow of time, and this is evidence of an attempt to reduce the importance of the epistemic role of each witness in the transmission of historical knowledge. Craig downplays the role of the witness as a judge of fact in order to devise a deductive model for establishing the certainty of religious history.

A more recognizable mathematical treatment of the issue of the decay of historical evidence is found in George Hooper's response to Craig, an essay published anonymously also in 1699 in the *Philosophical Transactions*.[87] Hooper's treatment of

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[86]Locke makes that claim in *Essay* 3.11.16, although as we have seen he refrains from applying a mathematical calculus to the probability of testimony on the ground that the evaluation of the credibility of witnesses cannot be reduced to "precise Rules" (4.16.9). The puzzling idea of demonstrating the probability of Christianity may also stem from Robert Boyle's *Some Considerations Touching the Reconcileableness of Reason and Religion* (first published 1675), wherein Boyle maintains that "there are moral demonstrations, such as those, where the conclusion is built, either upon some such proof cogent in its kind, or some concurrence of probabilities, that it cannot be but allowed, supposing the truth of the most received rules of prudence and principles of practical philosophy." See *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle* (London: J. and F. Rivington, 1772) 4:182.

[87] George Hooper, "A Calculation of the Credibility of Human Testimony," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 21 (1699): 359-65. Only recently agreement has been reached about the authorship of this article. Although already in the nineteenth century the *Dictionary of National Bibliography* attributed it to Hooper, Keynes reported that the article was for some time attributed to Halley. Keynes himself adhered, however, to the implausible thesis that the author was Craig. It is difficult to see how Craig could have written in 1699 an article, which explicitly refutes, or at least offers a substantially different treatment of, issues he had dealt with in a book published in the same year. See John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (London,: Macmillan, 1963), p. 184. More recently, Carlo Borghero has

historical probability is more recognizable both because he draws on the more standard conception of subjective epistemic certainty current in the period and because he gives an interpretation of mathematical probability in terms of Huygenian expectations that is more intelligible in the light of some of our contemporary approaches. Hooper first distinguishes between two kinds of moral certitude:

a) Moral certitude absolute, which obtains when "the Mind of Man entirely acquiesces" to a matter of fact and

b) "Moral Certitude Incompleat," which obtains when certitude amounts only to a fraction of absolute certainty and, admits of a continuum of degrees.[88]

The degree of moral certainty obtained via testimony depends, according to Hooper, on the credibility of the reporter. Instead of assuming an ideal witness, as did Craig, Hooper allows for a quantification of the credibility of each testimony. The reliability of a witness is rated according to his integrity and to his ability both to apprehend and to retain in memory a determinate matter of fact. According to this evaluation of the witness, the credibility of his testimony is quantified as a fraction of perfect certainty. So if a is the degree of credibility of a given testimony and c what this testimony is lacking to obtain absolute certainty, the expectation produced is $a/a+c$.

Hooper then proceeds to argue that testimony, when conveyed by a single chain of successive witnesses does suffer from a decay of credibility. The credibility of a single

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also attributed the short article to Craig, but largely, I suspect, because he relied on Keynes; see Borghero, *La Certezza e la Storia: Cartesianesimo, Pirronismo e Conoscenza Storica*, p. 195. Lorraine Daston says the article is "probably by George Hooper," Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment*, p 315. The same cautious claim can be found in Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods*. Finally, Richard Nash in his well-documented study of Craig's argument also makes a case for the attribution to Hooper; see *John Craige's Mathematical Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 3.. It is also to be noted that the editors of Hooper's *Works* included the short text in v. 1 of their edition; see George Hooper, *Works* (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1855).

[88] Hooper, "A Calculation of the Credibility of Human Testimony," p. 359.

successive chain of testimony yields $a^n/(a+c)^n$. Assuming that a single testimony

yields 5/6 of certainty and that successive witnesses are equally reliable then, two

witnesses will 25/36 of certainty; three will produce 125/216, and four witnesses will

yield an expectation of 625/1296. In that case, the fourth witness already obtains less

than half of absolute certainty and the matter of fact reported becomes doubtful.

Concurrent testimony, according to Hooper, adds probability in the following way. If

the first testimony has a probability of 5/6 and a second testimony a probability of 2/3,

Hooper proposes that we consider the second testimony as adding 2/3 of the 1/6 that

the first testimony wanted to yield full certainty. Thus, two concurrent, though very

unreliable, testimonies of 1/2 will nonetheless yield a certainty of 2/3.[89]

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[89] Ibid., p. 362. The idea that concurrent testimony adds to the probability of a matter of fact had been already dealt in a quasi-quantificational form by Mathew Hale who, in his *Primitive Origination of Mankind, Considered and Examined According to the Light of Nature* (1677), maintains: "If to any one quantum of fact there be many but probable evidences, which taken singly have not perchance any full evidence, yet when many of those evidences concur and concenter in the evidence of the same thing, their very multiplicity and consent makes the evidence the stronger; as the concurrent testimonies of many Witnesses make an evidence more concludent." Quoted in Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 187. A similar statement can be found in Boyle's *Some Considerations Touching the Reconcileableness of Reason and Religion*. Boyle raises the issue in the context of problems related to apologetics. He argues that, though Christianity be founded on probable testimony, the multiplication of concurrent testimonies amounts to a "moral demonstration" and "the conclusions of a moral demonstration are the surest, that men aspire to, not only in the conduct of private men's affairs, but in the government of states, and even of the greatest monarchies and empires." Now, he contends, it is often the case that the certainty of moral demonstrations is the result of the conjunction of merely probable testimony, which he explains by an analogy to "the practice of our courts of justice here in *England*." For "though the testimony of a single witness shall not suffice to prove the accused party guilty of murder; yet the testimony of two witnesses, though but of equal credit, that is, a second testimony added to the first, though of itself never a whit more credible than the former, shall ordinarily suffice to prove a man guilty; because it is thought reasonable to suppose, that, though each testimony single be but probable, yet a concurrence of such probabilities, (which ought in reason to be attributed to the truth of what they jointly tend to prove) may well amount to moral certainty, *i.e.* such certainty, as may warrant the judge to

To argue against the decay thesis, Hooper claims we have to consider a) that written tradition -- particularly after the invention of printing -- considerably diminishes the rate of decay of evidence as it enhances the reliability of what is preserved by tradition, and b) that history often comes in the form of concurrent chains of testimony. As written testimony slows the decay rate and the calculus of concurrent testimony shows an increase of probability, when we consider both factors, i.e. concurrent chains of successive written testimony the final result speaks against the Locke-Craig thesis:

> It is plain, that written Tradition, if preserv'd but by a single Succession of Copies, will not lose half of its full Certainty, until Seventy times a Hundred (if not two Hundred) Years are past; that is, Seven Thousand, if not Fourteenth Thousand Years; and further, that, if it be likewise preserv'd by Concurrent Successions of such Copies, its Credibility at that Distance may even be increas'd, and grow far more certain from the several agreeing Deliveries at the end of Seventy Successions, than it would be at the very first from either of the single Hands.[90]

If the mathematical side of Hooper's argument is still utterly unconvincing, given, at least, the arbitrariness involved in quantifying the reliability of a witness, the idea that concurrent chains of testimony increase the evidence reveals a concern to counter one form of historical skepticism as well as to establish the validity of socially produced forms of knowledge. The wide interest, if not the acceptance, of the arguments of Craig and Hooper is a symptom of the extensive concern about justifying socially transmitted forms of knowledge that this form of historical pyrrhonism generated.[91]

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proceed the sentence of death against the indicted party" (*The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, 4: 182).

[90]Hooper, "A calculation of the credibility of human testimony," p. 364.

[91]The complete history of the reception of this argument is yet to be written. Pierre Bayle mentions Craig's work in his famous "Third Clarification on Pyrrhonism" dealing with the conflict between faith and reason in his *Dictionary*; see *Dict.* 4:646. For a handy English translation, see Popkin's abridged edition Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, pp. 433-35. Nicolas Fréret presents a criticism of Craig and of mathematical treatments of probability in his "Réflexions générales sur l'étude des

1.2.5 The quarrel over the certainty of ancient history

Another important milestone in the debate over historical pyrrhonism is the quarrel over the certainty of the ancient history of Rome that took place in the French *Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres*.[92] The quarrel was motivated by a short presentation of Louis Jean Lévesque de Pouilly read in December 1722 and aimed at denying the reliability of the first four centuries of Roman history.[93] Lévesque de Pouilly's dissertation is a paradigmatic case of historical pyrrhonism in the sense of (4), i.e. as a form of skepticism about ancient history. The first lines of the dissertation states clearly Pouilly's case:

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anciennes histoires et sur le degré de certitude des différentes preuves historiques," in *Mémoires académiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), pp. 122-26. Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* discusses principally Hooper's version of the issue in two articles, "Certitude" and "Probabilité." Montmort, is particularly reluctant to apply mathematical treatments to moral probabilities; see Pierre Rémond de Montmort, *Essay d'analyse sur les jeux de hazard* (Paris: Chez J. Quillau, 1708). More sympathetic to the use of mathematics to solve problems of testimony is Jakob Bernoulli, *Jacobi Bernoulli ... Ars conjectandi : opus posthumum : accedit Tractatus de seriebus infinitis, et Epistola Gallice scripta de ludo pilae reticularis* (Basileae: Impensis Thurnisiorum fratrum, 1713). Richard Nash's study of Craig includes a very good history of the English reception of Craig's argument, citing responses by Samuel Clarke, Humphrey Ditton, Matthew Tindal, George Berkeley, and Alexander Pope. Hume's own solution to the problem of decay is to be found in *Treatise* 1.3.13.4-6. Discussions of the argument of the decay of historical evidence, although without explicit reference to either Craig or Hooper, can also be found in Christian August Crusius, *Weg zur Gewissheit und Zuverlässigkeit der Menschlichen Erkentniss* (Leipzig: 1747) pp. 1041-78.

[92] A thorough account of the debate, in which Claude Sallier and, later, Louis de Beaufort also participated, can be found in Carlo Borghero, "Pirronismo Storico, Tradizione Romana e Teoria Della Conoscenza Storica in un Dibattito Settecentesco all'Academie Des Inscriptions," *Filosofia* 32 (1981). Borghero published a shorter version of this paper as chapter nine of his *La Certezza e la Storia*.

[93] Louis Jean Lévesque de Pouilly, "Dissertation sur l'incertitude de l'Histoire des quatre premiers siècles de Rome. Par M. de Pouilly," in *Mémoires de littérature tirés des registres de l'Académie Royale des inscriptions et belles lettres: Depuis l'année M. DCCXVIII. jusques & compris l'année M. DCCXXV* (Á Paris: de l'Imprimerie Royale, 1729). Printed versions of the texts were already available by 1723.

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> Most of those that have written the history of remote times, have filled
> it with fictions; either because they intended to flatter their nation; or
> because, to the simplicity of truth, they have preferred the entertainment
> of the marvelous; or, finally, because they have been attracted by the
> vain pleasure of mendacity and of acquiring a kind of superiority over
> people by deceiving them. However, history so altered loses its value,
> and the observations drawn from it, by physics, morals, politics, and the
> law of nations, become suspect and misleading.[94]

Lévesque de Pouilly undertakes to give an instance of the general uncertainty of ancient history by showing the obscurity of ancient Roman history, "the most celebrated of all profane histories." His short dissertation attempts to show that Roman history is uncertain until Pyrrhus's wars, that Roman historians do not use reliable sources of information when they refer to these histories, that their testimony is often contradicted by other equally respectable historians, and that many of the deeds with which they credit the ancient Romans are in fact drawn from the histories of other nations. The overall outcome of Lévesque de Pouilly's argument is that histories based on tradition, and specifically on oral tradition are utterly defective, because they rest on a flawed method of transmission in which the original truth, if there was any, gets lost.

Levesque de Pouilly's dissertation elicited harsh responses from Claude Sallier and Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749), responses that aimed at the core of Pouilly's "historical pyrrhonism." The responses by Sallier and Fréret, as well as a defense by Pouilly were published in the same volume of the *Mémoires de Littérature de l'Académie des Inscriptions et des belles lettres* in which Pouilly's original dissertation appeared.

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[94] Ibid., p. 14. My translation of: "La plupart de ceux qui ont écrit l'histoire des temps reculés, l'ont remplie de fictions; soit qu'ils ayent voulu flatter leur nation, ou qu'á la simplicité du vrai ils ayent préféré l'agrément du merveilleux; soit enfin qu'ils ayent été sensibles au vain plaisir de se jouer des autres, & d'acquérir, en les trompant, une sorte de supériorité sur eux : cependant l'histoire ainsi alterée, perd ses avantages; & les observations qu'empruntent d'elle la physique, la morale, la politique & le droit des gens, deviennent suspectes &trompeuses."

Fréret's response to Lévesque de Pouilly is of particular interest for it not only addresses the challenge to the Roman historians, but also attempts to provide a philosophical response to the sort of historical pyrrhonism espoused by Pouilly.

Fréret's *Réflexions générales sur l'étude des anciennes histoires et sur le degré de certitude des différentes preuves historiques* was read at the *Académie des inscriptions et des belles-lettres* in March, 1724; and the text was published in vol. VI of the *Mémoires de literature* of the *Académie* in 1729.[95] Fréret's strategy against Lévesque de Pouilly consists in showing that the distinction between history and tradition is a fuzzy one, for, in general, every history ends up being a tradition. In other words, Fréret implies that the historical pyrrhonist, if consistent, must extend his pyrrhonism to all history or must accept that there are ways of saving the objectivity of historical facts, even the most ancient ones. At the end of his paper, Fréret accepts that ancient history is less reliable than modern history, but contends that this is not a sufficient reason for rejecting it. Its unreliability only calls for a more cautious examination of the facts reported by ancient traditions.

Fréret's *Réflexions* begin with a tribute to the work of seventeenth-century historians who, in the opinion of the author, have contributed so much to dissipating the darkness of the history of remote centuries.[96] However, many historians of the seventeenth century were too much imbued with an *esprit de système*, and for that reason proceeded to look on historical evidence only for those testimonies that supported their own views. Although ancient history comes in scattered fragments and, for that reason, interpretive work is always necessary; this is not a recipe for making these fragments fit with the historian's own presuppositions and prejudices. It

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[95] A modern reprint of Fréret's paper is available: "Réflexions générales sur l'étude des anciennes histoires et sur le degré de certitude des différentes preuves historiques," in Nicolas Fréret, *Mémoires académiques*, Paris: Fayard, 1996, pp. 75-126.

[96] Ibid., p. 75.

is true that the activity of a historian cannot be reduced to the weighing of the authorities of historical testimonies: "it is also often necessary to interpret and to complete them with conjectures and hypotheses drawing their force only from probability and from their link to the whole history."[97] In other words, historical conjectures are necessary, but the question then resolves into that of the proper method for conjecturing about history. According to the author of the *Réflexions*, the *esprit de système* of seventeenth-century scholars makes them orient their conjectures towards making historical facts fit into a presupposed systematic framework and thus to ignoring those facts that compromise the systematic coherence.[98] Conjectures in history must be guided instead by the *esprit philosophique* that has already taken shape in the early eighteenth century. For in fact "we only know particular truths, almost always disjoined from one another and repeated experience has convinced us of the falsity of all those sophisticated systems that criticism, politics and philosophy have imagined in these last centuries."[99] Contemporary fruitful work on history results from the mutual collaboration between philosophy and criticism [*critique*]. The latter consists in a methodology for establishing moral and empirical facts. The *critique* -- that is the work of philologists and historians -- permits philosophers to extend their factual knowledge and so to "increase the extension of their mind."[100] Philosophers, on the other hand, can provide the *critique* with its critical tools by teaching scholars how to doubt and suspend judgment. The *critique* is, thus, the *esprit philosophique* applied to establishing facts.

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[97] Ibid., pp. 77-79. My translation of: "il faut encore souvent les interpreter, et les supléer par des conjectures et des hypotheses qui ne tirent leur force que de leur probabilité, et de leur liaison avec le reste de l'histoire."

[98] Ibid., pp. 77-79.

[99] Ibid., p. 79. My translation of: "nous ne connoissons guère que des vérités particulières, presque toujours disjointes les unes des autres, et l'experience ne nous a que trop souvent convaincu de la fausseté de tous ces systêmes ingénieux, que la critique, la politique et la philosophie ont imaginés dans ces derniers siècles."

[100] "[A]ugmenter l'étendue de leur esprit." Ibid., p. 82.

The *esprit philosophique* is, however, sometimes guilty of too much zeal, and it leads occasionally to unjustified skepticism. Fréret sets for himself the task of contributing to a limitation of immoderate skepticism about history. In order to achieve this goal, he considers first the nature of historical evidence, distinguishing two kinds:

a) evidence derived from contemporary testimony

b) evidence from tradition

By contemporary testimony Fréret means written testimony produced by witnesses or historians contemporary to the facts reported. By "tradition" he understands "popular opinions out of which a nation is persuaded of the truth of a fact without having further proofs than its own persuasion and where this persuasion is not founded in any contemporary testimony subsisting independently of this same tradition."[101] The next step in the argument is to show that there are means for establishing the credibility of history founded on tradition. First, we can require that the facts reported by tradition be public and obvious (*publics et éclatans*), and that they be attested by a tradition that is otherwise consistent with other known facts. Second, notwithstanding the fact that ancient traditions convey historical knowledge in mythical or fabulous narratives, Fréret claims that it is possible to distinguish the true from the fabulous by thorough scholarship and criticism. He adds, that if we were to reject all evidence that is not contemporary written testimony, we would have to reject all the evidence (medals, coins, monuments, etc.) collected by antiquarians and that is so useful for historians. Fréret's defense of tradition involves thus a defense of antiquarian scholarship and of its utility as an auxiliary science for history.[102] It is also interesting to note that Fréret,

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[101] Ibid., p. 83. My translation of: "Par traditions historiques j'entends ces opinions populaires, en conséquence desquelles toute une nation est persuadée de la vérité d'un fait, sans en avoir d'autres preuves que sa persuasion même, et sans que cette persuasion soit fondée sur aucun émoignage contemporain subsistant séparément de la tradition même."

[102] In this sense Fréret's claim challenges Momigliano's contention that early eighteenth-century philosophical history was totally divorced from antiquarian scholarship and that it is only after Gibbon and, particularly, after Ranke, that

perhaps drawing on the findings of Fontenelle, has a less Manichean view of the "falsity" of myths and the memorial tradition.[103] He realizes that monuments, religion, and ceremonies were the ways many peoples used to conserve in their memory important events, and that they treated the information conveyed by this memorial system as reliable, objective and even binding in the case of some legal controversies.[104]

An argument like that of Levesque de Pouilly, that leaves unchallenged contemporary testimony and questions only tradition, is, according to Fréret, only a veiled form of radical historical pyrrhonism. For except for the facts of which we were direct witness, everything in history is indirect testimony and its credibility is liable to exactly the same charges of which tradition is found guilty. Otherwise put, all history

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historians took seriously antiquarian research. See Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian."

[103] Fontenelle's work, *De l'origine des fables* (which is essentially a rewriting of a former paper *Sur l'histoire)*, is perhaps the founder text of what will later be called comparative mythology. Fontenelle's claim is that the first historians, being as they were in the "infancy of society", were necessarily still playing within the discourse of fables and myths. As it is necessary to first teach children by way of narratives and stories, so was the case for the men of remote times. Reliable history can only be produced in humanity's age of reason. Fontenelle's original stance *vis-à-vis* the general contempt towards ancient history derives from the fact that he recognizes in ancient histories their being genuine endeavors to convey knowledge of past facts. Contemporary scholars have the means to deduce the real from the fabulous by comparing different narratives and by recognizing that myth and fables were not lies but a different, pre-rational, way of conveying objective "knowledge." See Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, "De l'origine des fables," in *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes: Nouv. éd. augm. de pièces diverses* (Paris: M. Brunet, 1724), pp.353-85. It is also interesting to note that this view of the importance of myth to history was also shared by Vico, who claims that "the first fables [of gentile nations] must have contained civil truths, and must therefore have been the histories of the first peoples" Cf. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 73.

[104] Ibid., p. 98.

is tradition and even our contemporary and well-attested events will become tradition for future generations who will not have the same access to evidence that we, contemporaries, have. Any history depends on the credibility of testimony and hence, Fréret suggests, either we embrace radical historical pyrrhonism and reject all history, or we should be satisfied with the available means for establishing the credibility of testimony. In this light, ancient history will differ from contemporary or modern history only insofar as evidence about ancient matters is scarce, and this evidence requires more interpretive work. However, the fact that we have to be more cautious about ancient history does not entail that we should reject it. In all cases "we must consider all, weigh the various degrees of probability, reject the false and assign to each fact its degree of truth or likelihood; vague and general suspicions should not lead us to indiscriminately reject all, but merely to avoid indiscriminately accepting all."[105]

Fréret's final reflection concentrates on the causes of historical pyrrhonism. The main cause is, in his opinion, the pre-eminence of interest in the study of mathematics and geometry among the learned and their contempt for all the humanistic sciences. Mathematics and Geometry are extremely useful for ordering our knowledge (*régler nos connoissances*) but not for extending knowledge or for guiding our practical action.[106] The crucial problem lies, according to Fréret, in the fact that the most important sciences -- morals, politics, economy, medicine, criticism and law -- are incapable of producing demonstrative and absolutely certain knowledge. The most they can produce is probability.

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[105] Ibid., p. 90. My translation of: "il faut examiner tout, peser les divers degrés de probabilité, rejetter le faux, et assigner à chaque fait le degré de vérité, ou de vraisemblance qui lui appartient : les soupcons vagues et généraux ne doivent pas nous porter à rejetter tout indistinctement, mais seulement à ne pas recevoir tout indistinctement."

[106] Ibid., p. 120.

For Fréret, however, probability should not be understood in the manner proper to the *théorie des combinaisons* as some would suggest. Mathematical probabilists may entertain the dangerous illusion that probability can be quantified. Fréret grants that some, like Bernoulli or Craig, did endeavor to mathematize probability, but he points out that the most important geniuses of the theory of combinations, e.g. Montmort, refused to follow that path because they were aware that prudential reasoning involves factors that are not quantifiable. For Fréret, the *théorie des combinaisons*, typically illustrated by calculus of chance in games, works only when applied to games in which human skills play no role. But in "tric-trac", as in many card games, to the calculus of equiprobable outcomes it is crucial to add the different degrees of skill possessed by the players; a task that can only be done by way of "arbitrary assumptions"[107] in such a way that probability problems can only be solved for particular cases. Fréret's charge against the use of mathematical probability in the moral and the natural sciences focuses on the fact that quantification of chances involves "arbitrary assumptions" and useless generalizations. It is not clear what Fréret means by "arbitrary assumptions." A good guess is that he points to the problems involved in assuming equiprobability in the mathematical calculus of chances. The assumption of equiprobability involves, in his view, the overlooking of the special circumstances surrounding any event in the natural and the moral sciences. In his view, "as soon as a problem has to do with the physical world, it is impossible to give a general solution, for the latter will only be true for the particular case defined by the assumptions we were constrained to make in order to determine the various degrees of force, resistance, etc."[108] The same line of reasoning applies to the moral sciences, where to establish the probability of a fact it is necessary to take into account countless circumstances surrounding the fact reported, e.g. the country, the century,

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[107] Ibid., p. 122.

[108] Ibid., pp. 122-23. My translation of: "dès qu'un problème se trouve mêlé de physique, il est impossible d'en donner une solution générale, elle ne sera jamais vraie que dans le cas particulier des suppositions que l'on a été contraint de faire pour déterminer les divers dégrés de force, de résistance, etc."

the profession of the witness, her character, the situation and the interest of those who make the report.[109] It appears, then, that Fréret's argument against applying mathematical probability to the natural and moral sciences, seems to come down to the following claim: in order to evaluate the probable outcome of any given complex natural event or human action, a concrete case analysis is required. Mathematical probability, however, either fails to capture the concreteness and complexity of any given case or attempts absurd calculations of factors that do not lend themselves to quantification.

John Craig, an otherwise very respectable mathematician, is for Fréret a living example of the absurdities to which mathematical probability leads when wrongly applied. Craig's probabilistic calculus of historical testimony leads ridiculously to the conclusion that the veracity of each historian can be determined by the proportion to which other historians or witnesses lie or tell the truth, and this regardless of the specific circumstances that make a particular testimony credible or not.

Fréret is ready to admit that the certainty or credibility of history increases when the historian is contemporary or not far removed in time from the facts she reports. This is not sufficient reason, however to reject ancient history. The lesser certitude of ancient history commands only a more cautious scrutiny of sources and evidences and a belief that is proportionate to them.

1.3 Conclusion

The discussions and debates that are often grouped under the label "historical pyrrhonism" are numerous and diverse. It was not my purpose to offer here an exhaustive analysis of this tradition or to provide a full systematization of the philosophical problems that underlie concerns about this particular form of skepticism about history. My intention was merely to portray a sample of this tradition by

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[109] Ibid., pp. 124-25.

presenting some of the authors that may also have influenced Hume's views. Some general remarks can nonetheless be drawn out of this rapid survey of historical pyrrhonism.

1. With an understanding of the legal underpinnings of the notion of "matter of fact" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the worry about historical skepticism can be seen as closely connected to worries about the possibility of devising social rules for securing knowledge claims that arise in the context of practices of social testimony. The court of law model for establishing facts differs substantially from the "empiricist" model based on sense perception or the "rationalist" model based on intellectual intuitions, for the law model sees the process of ascertaining facts not as a passive reception of the given, but rather as a *practice*. Many among the authors involved in discussions of historical pyrrhonism believe also that this model of ascertaining facts is not a special feature of moral philosophy, but that it also extends to ascertaining natural facts. Thus considered, the problems proper to pyrrhonism regarding history reveal a different mode of understanding to what it is to have empirical knowledge, a mode not easily subsumable under any of the two brand names, "empiricism" and "rationalism," by which we try to understand the philosophy of the period.

2. Hence, in this tradition, the problem of producing an account of how it is possible to have empirical knowledge is closely related to the problem of how it is possible to be *just* in judging of facts. Central to the problem of historical knowledge is the fact that historians and witnesses are never impartial spectators of events. As La Mothe le Vayer puts it, not even the general of an army can give a totally objective account of a battle, since his narrative must necessarily rely on the reports of his officers and overlook the point of view of the enemy. "Judgers of facts" are always individuals shaped by culture, partisanship, psychology, etc., and they never reach an unbiased or ideal point of view that would enable them to make perfect judgments. Having given up the model in which the knower is a passive receptor of the given, historical

pyrrhonists need to consider the problem of attaining impartiality and objectivity from within the social interplay of interested individuals. The problem of the objectivity of empirical knowledge so conceived resolves itself then into the problem of how it is possible to judge impartially even if the knower is an interested member of the social game. The problem of empirical knowledge is not the problem of attaining an *accurate*, but, rather, a *just* view of facts.

Chapter 2

History and Belief

2.1 Introduction

In an article published in 1965 that has been influential for the subsequent studies on the connection between Hume's philosophy and history, David Norton suggested that "it may well be that the most vexing problem Hume ever faced was that of finding out what the historical data were." He also added, "because he failed to solve [this problem], his philosophy collapsed into mere opinion."[1] The central claim that Norton maintained is that Hume's central philosophical claims and projects depend heavily on the possibility of establishing historical facts, a "detail" that has not been noticed, with very few exceptions, by the body of contemporary Hume scholarship. To mention only one of the areas in which historical knowledge appears to be crucial for Hume's philosophical enterprise, it suffices to remember that the beliefs about human nature that are supposed to ground Hume's science of man can only be derived, as Hume puts it, "from a cautious observation of human life" which necessarily includes observation of the past deeds of humankind (T Intro.10). In this early article, Norton argued that it is much to Hume's credit as well as to his misfortune that he was able to make explicit what appears to be an insurmountable tension, namely, that between a necessary skepticism about historical data and the fact that this data is a crucial component of a science of man.[2]

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[1] David Fate Norton, "History and Philosophy in Hume's Thought," in *David Hume: Philosophical Historian*, ed. David Fate Norton and Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs- Merrill, 1965), p. l.

[2] Ibid. p. xlviii.

After the publication of Norton's article, the line of inquiry he opened was taken seriously by only a few scholars.[3] In fact, there is, in my opinion, one serious survey of the issue that endeavors a re-interpretation of Hume in the light of his concern with history.[4] A possible reason for this neglect is the quite one-sided interest in Hume's epistemology and philosophy of science so long dominant among Hume scholars. From this perspective it may seem curious to think that Hume's project could fail because he was unable to account for historical data. After all, Hume's success in accounting for scientific beliefs would be sufficient to overcome a "minor" failure of that sort.

Since then, however, Hume scholarship has moved forward to produce a clearly different picture of Hume, one that presents him as, essentially, a moral philosopher whose views on science and epistemology should be understood in the light of their contribution to a moral understanding of important human practices. In the light of this evolution of our understanding of Hume, the question Norton raised becomes, in my opinion, a pressing issue. For, considered as a moral philosopher, the question

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[3] Articles and books that deal with the connection between history and philosophy in Hume's thought include: Simon Evnine, "Hume, Conjectural History, and the Uniformity of Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): pp. 589-606. Rudolf Luthe, *David Hume: Historiker und Philosoph*, (Germany: Alber, 1991). Spencer K. Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History: Historical Theory and Practice*, (Lanhan: University Press of America, 2000). David Wootton, "David Hume, 'the Historian' " in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, pp. 281-312. Christopher J. Berry, "Hume on Rationality in History and Social Life," *History and Theory* XXI (1982): pp. 234-247, and *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982).

[4] Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). The recent book by Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History* (2000) is in fact a collection of previously published articles with some new additions. Although this collection does illuminate certain important aspects of the discussion about the relation between historical knowledge and Hume's philosophical project, the book does not constitute a significant contribution to the issue that concerns me.

whether or not Hume can give a satisfactory account of historical beliefs, which are central to moral philosophy, is a crucial one.

It is worth noting here that both in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, the first example Hume gives of what is a causal belief is not about billiard balls, the sun rising tomorrow or any other obvious case of constant conjunction between two events but, unexpectedly, an historical belief. In the *Treatise* Hume proposes: "CÆSAR was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides* of *March*"(T 1.3.4.2) and in the first *Enquiry*:

> A man, who should find in a desert country the remains of pompous
> buildings, would conclude, that the country had, in ancient times, been
> cultivated by civilized inhabitants; but did nothing of this nature occur
> to him, he could never form such an inference (EHU 5.7).

This is surprising because these historical beliefs are supposed to illustrate the claim that for an epistemic state to be a belief, it is necessary that it be derived from an object present to the senses or to the memory (T 1.3.4.1; EHU 5.8).[5] For a contemporary reader of history, the claim that "CÆSAR was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides* of *March*"(T 1.3.4.2) is not, to say the least, an obvious case of a matter of fact present to the senses or to the memory. In fact, it rather seems as if Hume's conception of belief is incompatible with any account of beliefs that are the result of indirect, rather than personal experience.

Let us consider an experimental case that has all the appearance of confirming the suspicion about the implausibility of an account of historical beliefs given this description of Hume's conception of belief. Hume refers us to the case of two men who have been present at the same event, although one of them is unable to remember it. His companion, the one who remembers, mentions every circumstance related to

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[5] This claim was previously formulated in T 1.2.6.7, where Hume contends that "nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion. To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive."

the event until he touches one such circumstance that enables the other man remember the episode. "Here," Hume observes, "the person that forgets receives at first all ideas from the discourse of the other ... tho' he considers them as mere fictions of the imagination. But as soon as the circumstance is mention'd that touches the memory, the very same ideas now appear in a new light, and have in a manner, a different feeling from what they had before" (T 1.3.5.4).[6] This experiment may appear to suggest that we have no choice but to reject all experiences that result from testimony as mere "fictions of the imagination" because they can never touch our personal memory.[7] Given that all historical beliefs depend on testimony, it appears that for Hume only contemporary history as narrated by direct witnesses will be possible. Worse still, the historian will be alone, or in the limited company of the other witnesses of the events, in believing what she writes: her readers will have no ground for believing what she tells.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, many authors have complained that there is a tension between Hume's manifest interest in history and testimony, and what seems to be an account of belief that rules out testimony as a sufficient ground for believing.[8] The central question remains the one George Campbell raised in 1762: when Hume claims that causal inference is founded on past experience; is he referring to personal or to social experience?[9] As we will see later, most readers assume that Hume cannot

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[6] This example was added to Book 1 a few months after the publication of the *Abstract*, by means of an Appendix to vol. 3 of the *Treatise*.

[7] As will become clearer at the end of this chapter, this passage does not imply a thorough skepticism about whatever is not part of our personal experience. Instead of suggesting that no testimony is credible until we can remember that the matter of fact reported belonged to our personal experience, it suggests only that the mere testimony of a friend may not, in some situations, be sufficient evidence to produce belief.

[8] I see Norton's early article as making the claim that Hume's reduction of belief to personal experience makes problematic any account of historical beliefs.

[9] George Campbell, *A Dissertation on Miracles: Containing an Examination of the Principles Advanced by David Hume, Esq., in An Essay on Miracles* (Edinburgh:

be referring to social experience and thus the only remaining alternative -- that he is referring to personal experience -- reinforces the suspicion that his account of any socially shaped belief is doomed to be problematic.[10]

It is intriguing to speculate why Hume would choose a problematic case, as historical beliefs seem to be, as a way of introducing his readers to his central conception of belief and causal reasoning. Surely, it would have been much easier to employ the strategy contemporary teachers of Hume typically follow, namely, to introduce first non-problematic cases of belief in order to state the theory, and only then to consider how the theory responds to more challenging cases.[11] A first answer to this question can be drawn from Hume's concern with establishing a science of man. Given that concern and the central role to be played in it by moral philosophy, and given the central place that historical beliefs play in informing the experience from which central moral claims are to be drawn, it was only natural for him to think of historical beliefs as crucial cases for the success of his own theory. This is particularly compelling if one recalls that, unlike judgments in mathematics and physics, whose certainty was not seriously challenged, the epistemic status of the empirical judgments constituting the raw material of philosophy of morals did provide the subject matter of a heated controversy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I do not intend to suggest that Hume was unconcerned with explaining what we will now call "scientific" causal beliefs but, rather, that given his overall project and the context of the debate on the epistemic status of moral certitude, he may have thought that it was

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Printed for A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1762). I will use here the following edition: *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh: G. Caw, 1812).

[10] Don Garrett gives a short and clear statement of this tension. See his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 139.

[11] After publishing the *Treatise* and noticing the difficulty many readers had understanding his basic claims, Hume did present his theory with the more obvious example of the billiard balls. See *Abstract* 8 ff.

important for him to account first for these more controversial cases of beliefs in order to show the advantage of his own theory as compared to others.

A second answer to the question of why Hume chose historical beliefs as a starting point for the exposition of his own theory could be that he did not suppose that historical beliefs were problematic. In other words, perhaps those who see a problem or a tension between Hume's theory of belief and his attempt to account for historical beliefs are in fact missing an important point of his theory, one that explains why a belief of the sort of "CÆSAR was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides* of *March*" is, for Hume, a paradigmatic, rather than a problematic, case of belief.

In what follows I will attempt to rescue Hume from the charge of having failed to give a satisfactory account of historical beliefs by arguing not only that he has a response to historical skepticism, but that far from being worried about historical data, he saw historical beliefs as paradigmatic rather than problematic cases of belief.

An important motivation behind my argument is showing that Hume's account of historical belief is rendered consistent once we revise some important assumptions about Hume's theory of belief as normally interpreted. These assumptions are: 1) that belief results from deductively valid inferences; 2) that inferences in causal beliefs must necessarily run from causes to effect and not the other way round in order to be valid; and 3) that Hume maintains that sense perception and memory have epistemic primacy over testimony in belief-forming processes. I will argue that Hume has in fact a conception of logical inference very different both from the Aristotelian tradition in the background of his work, and from the modern understanding of logic in the background of the work of many Hume scholars. Hume's conception of inference makes a very different conception of reasoning possible, one in which the formal validity of arguments is far less important than the actual epistemic status of the inferential outcome. Hume's conception also allows for a bi-directional account of causal inferences that legitimates backward inferences from effects to causes, and, as a

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result, inferential reasoning about history. Another central assumption I will challenge is one that makes sense perception more certain than human testimony and therefore a better ground for founding beliefs. Against this view I will contend that Hume sees sense perception as standing on the same footing, and having the same structure, as testimony with respect to the evidence they yield and their capacity to trigger belief.

I will also claim that an interpretation that gives up these assumptions has the advantage of being able to:

a) Account for the centrality of historical beliefs in Hume's epistemology,

b) Uphold the consistency between a Humean account of both physical and historical causal inferences, a result which is crucial to Hume's commitment to a unified science of man in the introduction to the *Treatise*, and

c) Give a more satisfactory account of the role Hume gives to testimony in belief-forming processes.

2.2 The death of Caesar and causal reasoning

At the end of *Treatise* 1.3.2 (*Of probability; and of the idea of cause and effect*) Hume sets out two questions that, in his opinion, any account of causation must answer: 1) why for everything whose existence has a beginning we must suppose there is necessarily a cause? and 2) what is the nature of the causal inference and the belief which it yields?

The first question asks, in effect, whether the traditional claim that *ex nihilo nihil fit* is either intuitively or demonstratively true or is supposed true for some other reason. Hume's main argument at this point draws on his theory of ideas: the idea of cause is not so embedded in the idea of any temporal existent as to preclude the possibility of conceiving of that existent independently of any putative cause. The mere possibility of conceiving an uncaused object entails, first, that the necessity of causes is not intuitive and, second, that there is no logical necessity linking objects with causes, and

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therefore no possible demonstration for the traditional claim. In fact, as Hume argues in *Treatise* 1.3.3, that a cause is always necessary is something we learn from experience and, therefore, is itself the result of a causal inference. Consequently, the two initial questions resolve into the second: what is the nature of the inference that leads us from causes to effects or from effects to causes and yields belief?

Hume endeavors to answer this question in section 1.3.4 (*Of the component parts of our reasonings concerning cause and effect*). In the opening paragraph of that section he stresses the difference between causal and hypothetical reasoning. Whereas a hypothetical reasoning relates together claims without the involvement of any present impression, causal reasoning is a form of reasoning in which we are able to infer a non-existent event from an existent one. A causal inference can be immediate, as when we attend to the impression of the cause or its idea in our memory; or mediate, as when a cause is inferred from other causes. However, if a causal inference is to be distinguished from hypothetical reasoning, the chain of inference must avoid infinite regression and be shown to rest at some point on a present impression or an idea of memory. It is only on that condition that the inference yields belief. Thus, the essential conditions for a causal belief are two:

1) That it is founded either on an impression of the senses or on an idea of memory.

2) That it results from an inference, immediate or mediate, from something existent to something non-existent.

In 1.3.4.2 Hume proceeds to "give an instance of this," i.e. a paradigmatic case of a causal belief displaying these two conditions. His example is the assassination of Caesar:

> [W]e may choose any point of history and consider for what reason we either believe or reject it. Thus we believe that Caesar was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides* of *March;* and that because this fact is establish'd on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event. Here are certain

characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters we likewise remember to have been us'd as the signs of certain ideas; and these ideas were either in the minds of such as were immediately present at that action, and receiv'd the ideas directly from its existence; or they were deriv'd from the testimony of others, and that again from another testimony, by a visible gradation, 'till we arrive at those who were eye-witnesses and spectators of the event. 'Tis obvious all this chain of argument or connexion of causes and effects, is at first founded on those characters or letters, which are seen or remember'd and that without the authority either of the memory or senses our whole reasoning wou'd be chimerical and without foundation (*Treatise* 1.3.4.2).[12]

G.E.M. Anscombe noted that this paragraph is a very tricky one, because although "[r]ead casually, all seems uncommonly smooth and acceptable," when a little attention is paid "it collapses."[13] Even though I will try to show that, in fact, the argument holds good, it has to be acknowledged that a careful reading of it may leave one thinking that Hume presents his case in an odd way. I will endeavor to show that the putative oddities of the argument are mostly derived from contemporary presuppositions about causal inferences, presuppositions that need not be attributed to Hume. The presuppositions at stake here are three: 1) that inferences from cause to effect cannot, despite Hume's claims, be epistemically symmetrical to inferences from effects to causes; 2) that Hume is concerned here with the justification of historical beliefs; and 3) that by "inference" Hume must mean "formally valid inference."

Anscombe presents her own reading of the argument and concludes that Hume's position reveals itself to be "incredible." She is surprised to find Hume explaining in 1.3.4.1 the structure of an inference from causes to effects while giving "an instance

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[12] A similar claim is advanced in *EHU* 4.4.

[13] G.E.M. Anscombe, "Hume and Julius Caesar," *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 86. Donald Livingston criticizes Anscombe's argument in his "Anscombe, Hume and Julius Caesar," *Analysis* 35 (1974-75): pp. 13-19.

of this" that is in fact a piece of reasoning from effects to causes.[14] Anscombe accepts that the inference, then, is from the present characters seen or remembered to the killing of Caesar and assumes that this is the starting point that must be supposed if the inference is to be taken as causal rather than hypothetical. But, she complains, that alone will not do. For if the inferential chain was *from* the present "characters and letters" *to* the killing of Caesar and the killing of Caesar is a belief of which we cannot have a direct perception or a personal memory, then the chain of inference will not have a final perceptual end point and will become a hypothetical argument, which is precisely what Hume was trying to rule out.

This is, however, a correct characterization of the argument only if we assume, as Anscombe does, that Hume is trying to avoid an infinite regression in a chain of *justifications*. On this interpretation, what Hume requires here is some empirical evidence that puts an end to the search for the reasons that justify a certain belief. As she puts it: "Hume is arguing not merely that we must have a starting point, but that we must *reach* a starting point in the justification of these inferences."[15] Of course, if we take the argument as an attempt to *justify* the belief that "Caesar was killed in 44 BC," then the "starting point" can no longer be the "present characters and letters." For *that* we have read that Caesar was killed in the senate-house on the *ides* of March can never count as a justification for that belief. Given the requirements of a justificatory strategy, the starting point can only be a present impression or a direct remembrance of the killing of Caesar, neither of which, of course, are available. But in that case Anscombe is obliged to ascribe to Hume the – implausible -- claim that the

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[14] The first sentence of the paragraph contains, however, a disjunction that discloses Hume's commitment to the bi-directionality of causal reasoning, to the view that such reasoning may go from effects to causes or to causes to effects: "Tho' the mind in its reasonings from causes *or* effects carries its view beyond those objects, which it sees or remembers, it must never lose sight of them entirely..." (T 1.3.4.1, italics are mine).

[15] Anscombe, "Hume and Julius Caesar," p. 87.

chain of inferences that is at stake here is the one that, presumably, can be reconstructed *from* the killing of Caesar *to* the present text of history, and that Hume is somehow implying that the evidence on which the belief is founded is carried *through* a chain of testimony stretching from that event.

Here is how Anscombe reconstructs Hume's argument:

(1) "A chain of reasons for a belief must terminate in something that is believed without being founded in anything else."

(2) The ultimate belief must be about something perceived or remembered.

(3) "The immediate justification for a belief *p*, if the belief is not a perception, will be another belief *q*, which follows from, just as much as it implies, *p*."

(4) "We believe by inference *through* the links of a chain of records [italics are mine]."[16]

It is not surprising that Anscombe finds Hume's argument odd and "incredible." For how could the evidence of the initial perceptions of the eyewitnesses of an event be *carried through* the testimony of historians? This impossibility leads her to protest that "[b]elief in recorded history is on the whole a belief *that there has been* a chain of tradition of reports and records going back to contemporary knowledge; it is not a belief in the historical facts that passes through the links of such a chain."[17]

What is indeed surprising is the way Anscombe interprets *Treatise* 1.3.4.1-2. Consider, for instance (1) and (2): In 1.3.4.1 Hume does not say that our inferential chains must stop somewhere in a perceptual *belief.* He says only that "the only thing, that can stop them, is an impression of the memory or senses, beyond which there is no room for doubt or enquiry." Describing Hume's claim as the requirement for

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[16] *Ibid.* p.88.

[17] *Ibid.* p.89.

founding causal inferences on perceptual beliefs has, of course, the immediate result of ruling out the most obvious, even if strange, reading of 1.3.4.2. For, according to Anscombe's interpretation, the causal chain cannot be founded on "the characters and letters" because these are not the cause of any relevant perceptual belief for the justificatory inference at stake (though they can be the cause of other perceptual beliefs).

Equally intriguing is the question why Anscombe would think that Hume is committed to understanding "inference" as "justificatory inference" as is suggested in (3). The explicit purpose of *Treatise* 1.3.4 is by and large to explain the structure of causal belief (in Hume's words, "the component parts of our reasonings concerning cause and effect") *not* to give an account of what *justifies* causal beliefs. Hume's central claim is therefore not that a non-perceptual belief that q is only justified when we can provide a perceptual belief p that implies it. He claims merely that when we have causal beliefs it is because we have some piece of empirical evidence *conjoined* with an inference to that belief and, conversely, when we lack any evidence we have only a hypothetical reasoning and no causal belief.

Leon Pompa advances a second unsatisfactory reading of this key paragraph. Pompa believes that *Treatise* 1.3.4.2 makes sense only as a transcendental argument.[18] It is not clear why inferring backwards from an effect to a cause should be characterized as a transcendental argument, but, in any case, this conjecture shows Pompa's difficulty in understanding Hume's claim that inferences from causes to effect and from effects to causes are equally reliable. For otherwise he would not need a special tag ("transcendental") to characterize the inferences that Hume discusses in this paragraph. But, having so characterized Hume's position, Pompa undertakes a critique of it, intending to prove it "defective."

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[18] Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 25.

Pompa first contends that Hume's account of historical beliefs overlooks the fact that most of our beliefs about history are not derived from personal inferences, but from education, and testimony. Thus, we usually believe in facts about Caesar not because we have arrived at them by causal inference but, rather, because we are used to hearing about Caesar's assassination in plays, in school, etc. According to Pompa, then, Hume ignores the fact that the majority of our historical beliefs are *inherited* rather than *inferential*.[19] The second criticism raised against Hume's argument is that, when historical knowledge is inferential, as is sometimes the case with historians when doing research, the inferential reasoning involved cannot be of the sort Hume describes for inferences of that sort are logically unwarranted.[20] Transcendental arguments of the sort Pompa supposes Hume to advance will not do, for the available present evidence can never be the sole ground for inferring the past fact whenever there is more than one possible hypothesis to account for that fact. In the case of conflicting hypotheses, one has to interpret and contrast each available hypothesis against further evidence. The problem with Pompa's reading is similar to that of Anscombe's: unwilling to accept that Hume finds that backward inferences can be as reliable as inferences from causes to effects, he ends up misconstruing Hume's claim in a way that renders it an easy target for criticism.

Why is it so difficult to accept that what ultimately explains our belief that Caesar was killed in the senate-house in 44 BC is simply "the characters and letters" of which we have perceptual evidence? First, some interpreters may have trouble making sense of this paragraph because they find it difficult to accept the thesis that causal inferences

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[19] *Ibid.* p. 29.

[20] "The only certain assertions about the past which we can make solely upon the strength of the presence of something which may be a putative piece of evidence are those which follow *logically* from the existence of the thing in question. But these would be wholly general and would not justify belief in any particular matter of fact." *Ibid.* p. 31.

can be bi-directional, or that it is as legitimate to infer causes from effects as to infer effect from causes. One obstacle to accepting this claim as a plausible thesis is the fact that contemporary philosophers are widely agreed that the causal relation is not symmetrical. Surely, if *p* causes *q* is true; then *q* causes *p* must be false.[21] Hume does not, of course, deny this claim about the directionality of causes.

To understand the sense in which causal inferences may be bi-directional for Hume it is necessary to establish which of the many possible relations in which a cause and an effect may stand to one another is said to be symmetrical. The *causal relation* cannot be symmetrical for this would entail the counterintuitive claim that the effect must also be the cause of its cause. Neither can the *temporal relation* be symmetrical for Hume, for he explicitly acknowledges the temporal priority of causes to effects (T 1.3.2.7). But for Hume the *inferential relation* -- understood as consisting in thought transitions between the ideas of cause and effect -- is symmetrical. For Hume, the causal *inference* can run in both directions. That is, from a presently experienced cause we may infer an effect, but we may also, from a presently experienced effect, infer a cause. This claim as such would not bear much significance if it were taken merely as a claim about our psychology. That we can in fact think about a cause when we attend to an effect does not necessarily say anything about the epistemic status of the inferential move. What may be difficult to see is that Hume is committed to this form of *epistemic symmetry* of causal inferences, i.e. to the claim that an inference from the effect to the cause may be as reliable, *epistemically speaking*, as an inference from the cause to the effect

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[21] For a review of the many different theses through which this standard account of causality has been construed as well as for an argument claiming that Hume was perhaps committed to the bi-directionality of causal inferences, see Tom Beauchamp & Alexander Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 201-246.

Although the principle that inferences from causes to effects are epistemically symmetrical to those from effects to causes is not explicitly stated as such by Hume, he uses it sufficiently often to make little room for doubting his endorsement of it.[22] In *Treatise* 1.3.9.12 he makes the general claim that, "[w]hen we receive any matter of fact upon human testimony, our faith arises from the very same origin as our inferences from causes to effects, and from effects to causes." And, discussing animal reasoning, he offers an example more like to the case of the killing of Caesar:

> As to the former actions, I assert they proceed from a reasoning, that is not in itself different, nor founded on different principles, from that which appears in human nature. 'Tis necessary in the first place, that there be some impression immediately present to their memory or senses, in order to be the foundation of their judgment. From the tone of voice the dog infers his master's anger, and foresees his own punishment (T 1.3.16.6).

That is, we see here that a present impression can give rise either to an inference backwards (the master's anger) or to a *prognosis* (the punishment).[23]

Hume's discussion of the argument from design in the first *Enquiry* also provides an interesting context for understanding Hume on inferences from effects to causes. There he displays not only his conviction of the legitimacy of such inferences, but also

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[22] Neither was Hume's view of the bi-directionality of causal inferences an original contribution. A similar view was already held by Arnauld and Nicole in the Port-Royal *Logic:* "These rules, which are helpful for judging about past events, can easily be applied to future events. For as we ought to believe it probable that an event has happened whenever certain circumstances we know about are ordinarily connected with that event, we also ought to believe that it is likely to happen whenever present circumstances are such that they are usually followed by such an effect." Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking,* p. 273.

[23] For other instances of the use of the principle of bi-directional inference, see T 1.3.6.4 and 1.3.13.6. David Norton also notes that Hume's understanding of *inference* allows for bi-directional inferences. See his Editor's Introduction to the OPT edition of the *Treatise,* p. 132

his awareness of the risks of an over-extended use of backward inferences. We can read what he says there also as a way of setting limits for retrospective inferences:

> When we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect. A body of ten ounces raised in any scale may serve as a proof, that the counterbalancing weight exceeds ten ounces; but can never afford a reason that it exceeds a hundred. If the cause, assigned for any effect, be not sufficient to produce it, we must either reject that cause, or add to it such qualities as will give it a just proportion to the effect. But if we ascribe to it farther qualities, or affirm it capable of producing other effects, we can only indulge the licence of conjecture, and arbitrarily suppose the existence of qualities and energies, without reason or authority (EHU 11, 12).

On the whole, the point made here is that inferences from effects to causes are legitimate provided we do not infer more than is allowed. In the historical case we are considering, to determine whether an inference from "characters and letters" to the circumstances of Caesar's death is legitimate we should establish whether the factual claim that results from the inference is "proportionate" to its attributed effect. But it is clear that inferring from effects to causes is for Hume, in the appropriate circumstances, a valid inferential move.

I do not think that, in general, Hume is very much concerned with questions of justification, but I do not need to rely on such a general claim for the purposes of the present argument. I need only to point out that there is no unequivocal indication that in the paragraph under discussion Hume is arguing, as Anscombe and Pompa suggest, about the justification of historical beliefs.[24] Hume is actually clear that his intention is to disclose the "component parts" of causal reasoning and thus, basically, to describe

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[24] I agree on this point with David Owen who observes that "Hume is concerned, in these early sections of Part 3, not with questions of whether probable reasoning is warranted, but with the question of how we come by beliefs in the unobserved *at all.*" David Owen, *Hume's Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 137.

the structure of causal inferences. He holds the view that, whereas hypothetical inferences are not subject to limiting conditions, causal inferences need to be anchored in some piece of present evidence or experience if they are to reliably yield belief. That "evidence" need not be a perceptual *belief*, as Anscombe claims, but only something that secures the status of the inferential output as a belief by supplying vivacity which is added to what is conceived, i.e. an impression of sense or an idea of memory.

The question now becomes, why for Hume do inferences from effect to causes ground beliefs as firmly as inferences from causes to effect, despite the fact that it may seem to us that, in order to make a legitimate inferential move from effect to cause it is necessary to rule out the possibility of there being other possible causes of a given effect, a condition which in most cases we find it impossible to fulfill. As Pompa pointed out, it is not possible for a historian to rule out exclusively, on logical grounds, the possibility of there being other causes to a given event. In this sense, although to go from effect to causes may be a natural psychological move, it does not follow that the move is a epistemically legitimate. That we immediately think of a cause when we attend to an event that it is customarily associated with such a cause does not entail that we are *justified* in so doing and that this is a reliable belief-forming mechanism. This way of conceiving the problem, however, presupposes that Hume is indeed arguing for the *justification* of historical beliefs and that he understands justification in ways that are similar to the contemporary ones. The central difference, I submit, is that Hume's understanding of what an inference is substantially different from the contemporary approach, for he does not distinguish clearly between psychological and logical inference, between a description of how the mind behaves and a prescription of how it ought to behave if it wants to preserve a right to knowledge claims.

It is important in this respect to understand that Hume's conception of logic does not include a notion of formally valid inferences. Traditional syllogistic logic and

contemporary symbolic logic rest on the idea that the validity of a deductive argument depends on the meaning of logical constants.[25] Ordinary material inferences that are accepted in common talk are not, either for an Aristotelian or for a contemporary logician, valid inferences.

A material inference like:

(1) The maple leaves are turning red

(2) Therefore, the autumn is beginning

is only valid if (2) is derived from the conjunction of (1) and

(3) The autumn begins when the leaves turn red

David Owen argues persuasively that early modern anti-Aristotelian philosophers such as Descartes, Locke and Hume rejected the formal conception of inference in favor of a view that makes the validity of deductive arguments depend on the meaning or the content of the concepts involved.[26] Whereas a formal approach to deductive

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[25] For the general claim that Hume's rejects a formal conception of inference I am very much indebted to David Owen's book *Hume's Reason* and to conversation with David Norton.

[26] Cf. David Owen, *Hume's Reason*, p. 5. Descartes' clearest formulation of his rejection of a formalist conception of inference is, perhaps, to be found in the Rule X of his *Regulæ:* "Some will perhaps be surprised that in this context, where we are searching for ways of making ourselves more skilful at deducing some truths on the basis of others, we make no mention of any of the precepts with which dialecticians suppose they govern human reason. They prescribe certain forms of reasoning in which the conclusions follow with such irresistible necessity that if our reason relies on them, even though it takes, as it were, a rest from considering a particular inference clearly and attentively, it can nevertheless draw a conclusion which is certain simply in virtue of the form. But, as we have noticed, truth often slips through these fetters, while those who employ them are left entrapped in them... Our principal concern here is thus to guard against our reason's taking a holiday while we are investigating the truth about some issue; so we reject the forms of reasoning just described as being inimical to our project. Instead we search carefully for everything which may help our mind to stay alert, as we shall see below. But to make even clearer that the aforementioned art of reasoning contributes nothing whatever to knowledge of the truth, we should realize that, on the basis of their method, dialecticians are unable to

arguments accepts arguments as valid only when certain rules of inference have been respected, and regardless of the content (i.e. the truth) of the premises, the approach that characterizes the view of these early modern philosophers implies that arguments that are only formally valid and whose content does not yield truth or probability as the conclusion are not acceptable. In other words, the approach of these early-modern philosophers does not distinguish between the formal rules that render an argument valid and the epistemic conditions that render it sound.[27]

The authors of the *Port-Royal Logic* had already pointed out that an inference was a comparison of ideas.[28] They also thought that, although the syllogistic method was useful for assessing arguments, an excessive praise of this method had led to the mistaken view that what makes an argument a good one is its formal structure. Against that view, they argued that good arguments are the ones in which the

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formulate a syllogism with a true conclusion unless they are already in possession of the substance of the conclusion, i.e. unless they have previous knowledge of the very truth deduced in the syllogism." Descartes, AT X 405-406.

[27] Don Garrett also stresses the importance of understanding Hume's conception of inference in its historical context: "Hume's famous argument [the argument that inductive inferences are not determined by reason] is formulated in terms of an archaic distinction between demonstrative and probable arguments – a distinction based (…) on the *certainty* or *degree of evidence* that an argument actually bestows on its conclusion. This deduction has now, of course, been largely replaced by the distinction between deductively valid and deductively invalid arguments, a distinction that concerns only the nature and strength of the *connection* between premises and conclusions. Thus, an argument with false or weak premises may be deductively *valid* for us, although it would not have been *demonstrative* for Hume." Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philo*sophy, p. 94. In support of this view, consider what Arnauld and Nicole say in the *Port-Royal Logic*: "We rarely allow our selves to be misled by arguments that are defective merely because the conclusion is badly drawn. And those who could not recognize a fallacy by the light of reason alone would usually not be able to understand the rules behind it, much less to apply them." Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*, p. 135.

[28] Cf. Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, p. 135.

conclusion can be shown to be (intensionally) "contained" in the premises.[29] In their view, for example, enthymematic arguments of the sort

(1) Socrates is a man

(2) Therefore, Socrates is mortal

are already good arguments, and thus that the addition of

(3) All men are mortal

ought not to be considered as a way of making that inference *valid*, but, rather, as a way of making explicit *why* the enthymeme was already a good inference.[30]

An inference is, therefore, a transition from one idea to another; a transition that is made possible by the intensional content of the ideas involved. When the intensional content of an idea entails the conclusion intuitively, i.e. when it is impossible for the mind to conceive one idea without conceiving the other, the inference is called *intuitive*; when the same conclusion is arrived at in the same manner but by the interposition of a middle terms, the inference is called *demonstrative*. When, on the contrary, the mind is compelled to pass from one idea to the other, but where the two ideas can be conceived separately, the inference is called *probable* and the degree of certainty that the inference yields is open to question.

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[29] *Ibid.* p. 162-164.

[30] *Ibid.* p. 136. In p. 175 Arnauld and Nicole also contend that an enthymeme is "a perfect syllogism in the mind but imperfect in expression, because one of its propositions is suppressed as too clear and well known, and as easily supplied by the minds of one's listeners." Enthymemes, according to Arnauld and Nicole, are very common in speeches and in writings where only rarely all the propositions of an argument are spelled out. Furthermore, they contribute to the elegance of discourses which would be graceless were all the enthymemes removed form them: " The reason is that, since one of the principal attractions of discourse is to be full of meaning and to allow the mind to form a thought that is more comprehensive than the expression, it is, by contrast, one of its greatest defects to be devoid of sense and to include very few thoughts, which is almost inevitable in philosophical syllogisms." *Ibid.* p. 176.

Hume's understanding of inference and reasoning draws from this tradition with two notable variants. First, Hume terms *perceptions* what the tradition from Descartes through Locke called *ideas*, and introduced a distinction between more lively perceptions, or those he called *impressions*, and less lively or faint perceptions, or those he called *ideas*. Second, the distinction between impressions and ideas permits Hume to stress the difference between idea-idea inferences that constitute abstract and hypothetical reasonings, and belief-fixing reasonings that are founded on impression-idea inferences.

Hume does think that causal reasoning, as with most practical reasoning, proceeds, if viewed from the traditional or formalistic perspective, enthymematically. That is, he supposes, that our causal inferences are not derived from universal principles that render them valid but, rather, that they result from an unreflective transition from the perception of the cause to that of the effect, or vice versa:

> A person, who stops short in his journey upon meeting a river in his way, [NB the person has an impression] foresees the consequences of his proceeding forward; and his knowledge of these consequences is convey'd to him by past experience, which informs him of such certain conjunctions of causes and effects. But can we think, that on this occasion he reflects on any past experience, and calls to remembrance instances, that he has seen or heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies? No surely; this is not the method, in which he proceeds in his reasoning. The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection (T 1.3.8.13).[31]

As the example clearly shows, Hume's appeal to past experience does not constitute a way to provide a premise that would complete an otherwise invalid argument. Past

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[31] Consider also T 1.3.12.7: "When we follow only the habitual determination of the mind, we make the transition without any reflection, and interpose not a moment's delay betwixt the view [NB: an impression] of one object and the belief of that, which is often found to attend it. As the custom depends not upon any deliberation, it operates immediately, without allowing any time for reflection."

experience is appealed to in order to *explain* why immediate or reflexive causal inferences occur.

With this account of the meaning of "inference" in mind, it is possible to understand better why Hume would have been committed to the bi-directionality of causal inferences in such a way as to find perfectly acceptable an inference from the "characters and letters" of a book of history to the historical fact that is reported in it. The question to be asked is whether it is possible for the mind to run from the written report that Caesar was killed in 44 BC to the idea of that historical fact in such a way as to "see" the inferential transition clearly enough as to command belief.[32] The answer is yes. As a matter of fact, when we read in a book of history that Caesar was killed in such and such circumstances on a determinate date, we believe it. Moreover, admitting inferences from effects to causes does not entail, as Pompa suggests, that we would be unable to assess historical facts in cases in which there is more than one possible cause that can be attributed to a given effect. Again, Hume's problem is not to *justify* belief in an historical fact, but to explain it. That is why he has chosen a non-controversial belief as an example. However, had he been confronted with the situation Pompa sets out, he would have had the resources to meet the objection without departing from his conception of inference. As we have seen, Hume's discussion of the argument from design shows that he had the resources to assess, when an inference from effect to cause has been made, which conclusions are warranted and which are not.

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[32] Hume's acceptance of the legitimacy of material inferences may not, after all be an archaic feature of his thought as Garrett claims (See note 27). For a contemporary defense of material inferences see Brandom's *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) or his *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism,* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000).

It is now possible to offer an alternative reading of *Treatise* 1.3.4.2. If we read this paragraph without assuming 1) that it is about the justification of historical beliefs, 2) that causal inferences are epistemically asymmetric or unidirectional, and 3) that by "inference" Hume meant "formally valid inference", then most of the puzzling features of the argument vanish. First, attention must be given to what Hume actually says. And he clearly says that "we believe that Caesar was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides* of *March* ... because this fact is establish'd on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event." In other words, the reason we believe in a historical fact is, simply, that we possess testimonial evidence.

In the second section of the paragraph Hume says:

> Here are certain characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters we likewise remember to have been us'd as the signs of certain ideas; and these ideas were either in the minds of such as were immediately present at that action, and receiv'd the ideas directly from its existence; or they were deriv'd from the testimony of others, and that again from another testimony, by a visible gradation, till we arrive at those who were eye-witnesses and spectators of the event (T 1.3.4.2).

This discussion of the inference from the "characters and letters," constitutes an attempt to make explicit the inferential operations of the mind that are at work when our belief in historical facts is unreflectively triggered by testimony. Hume's goal in this passage is not to *deduce* the fact from the evidence, but only to explain the implicit "transitions" that help us conceive the assassination of Caesar with the amount of vivacity necessary to command belief. He points out that our mind easily runs from the perception of printed characters to the meaning of these characters (the ideas). Then it easily conceives these ideas as being possessed either by a witness present at the event reported, or by those who have learned of the event indirectly through reporters of one kind or another (historians, compilers of annals, hearsay, etc). If the latter be the case, the mind would find a way to run backward from these

indirect reporters to the final direct witnesses. The inference that is being described is not the one that *produces* the belief, but the one that completes or make explicit the representation of the story told as a matter of fact. It is because we already believe in the testimony reporting the killing of Caesar that we can reconstruct this backward-running chain of inference. The inference that is being presented by Hume in the paragraph is not the impression-idea inference founding our belief in the assassination of Caesar, but only the idea-idea reasoning that makes explicit the implicit belief-forming inference. However, it should be kept in mind that Hume does not think that this chain of inference is a necessary, "component part" of causal reasoning, any more than he thinks it is necessary to recall all our past experience before being able to have the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. The causal inference goes immediately from the testimony that we take as evidence to the historical fact, without the need of a reflective inference of the sort described.[33]

This account also serves to explain how Hume can distinguish between history and fiction, given that both present us with "characters and letters." One can wonder what is so special about the "characters and letters" of a book of history, as opposed to those of a piece of fiction, such that we believe in the former – take it to contain facts – and do not believe the latter. The answer is, again, quite simple: the difference lies in the nature of the testimony, of the "characters and letters". We already know, when reading a novel, that the events narrated are the product of the imagination or, if they refer vaguely to history as in some historical novels, that the facts reported may have been altered for aesthetic reasons:

> If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them (T 1.3.7.8) .

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[33] I discuss in more detail the distinction between reflexive and reflective inferences in chapter 3.

But what if we mistakenly take a piece of fiction as a book of history? In that case, it may well happen that through our reading of the book we experience that some reported facts conflict with either other known facts, or with our general experience of nature or social life. At this point the suspicion may arise that we are not in fact reading history. But in a situation in which, for example, someone reading a novel is led to believe he is reading a biography, it may well happen that the belief that he is reading reports on established facts will not be shattered by the mere reading of the book, and the person in question could even make explicit why is it that she believes in any of the biographical "facts" found in the book by displaying an inference going from "the characters and letters" to the "reported" events. In that case the error can only be revealed by someone else giving testimony that this book is a piece of fiction not a biography; if no one provides that testimony, then the belief will remain unchallenged.

As a consequence of this reading of the paragraph we are also now in a position to understand why Hume gave a historical belief as an illustration of his explanation of the structure of *any* causal belief. For, given that he assumes causal inferences are epistemically symmetrical and that he is only concerned to explain the structure of causal inferences, and not to lay down requirements for justificatory inferences, we can see that beliefs in historical facts are no longer problematic cases of belief. On the contrary, they paradigmatically represent inferences *from* a present impression or an idea of memory *to* the idea of something that is unobserved.

2.3 Testimony and evidence: the common sense response

The story I have presented so far seems to be at odds with other common assumptions about Hume's conception of belief. For the claim that the mere perception of testimony is a sufficient ground of belief appears to contradict a common interpretation of Hume, one that anchors our disposition to believe exclusively in

personal evidence (perception or memory). In other words, the fact that Hume himself chose to use historical belief grounded on testimony as a paradigmatic case of causal reasoning undercuts the thesis that Hume is committed to the epistemic primacy of personal perception and memory, to the total exclusion of testimony. My reading of Hume on historical belief conflicts with two theses commonly ascribed to Hume. The first is that personal impressions and memory are the sole foundation of belief and that they, therefore, *exclude* testimony as a reliable source of belief-formation. The second thesis, which follows from the first, is that intersubjectively shaped beliefs -- of which historical beliefs are an important subset -- can be properly called beliefs only if they can somehow be reduced to personal experience. I will call the first "the primacy thesis" and the second, "the reductive thesis."

The standard text for Hume's account of the connection between testimony and belief is the essay, "Of Miracles," Section 10 of the first *Enquiry*. In this essay Hume maintains that the connection between testimony and belief is subject to the same causal tests that apply to than any other constant conjunctions.[34] For that reason, the appropriate question for setting out the issue is: what is the past experience that makes possible the inferential transition from the reception of testimony to the formation of belief? Hume's well-known answer is that our implicit or reflexive transitions from *testimony* that *p* to *belief* that *p* are rooted in our experience of certain features of human nature. Thus, the tenacity of memory, an inclination to tell the truth, and the fear of being publicly caught in the act of lying are among the reasons that explain why we feel we can accept as reliable our "inferences" from testimony to belief.

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[34] "It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connexion together, and that all the inferences, which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident, that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, whose connexion with any event seems, in itself, as little necessary as any other." *EHU* 10.5

However, in the case of testimony these inferences do not always amount to a "proof" of the fact reported; they often yield only "probability." We have to bear in mind the distinction between proof and probability -- the two being species of the genus "probability" -- as set out in the *Treatise* 1.3.11.2. Proofs are those probable arguments "which are deriv'd from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty"; whereas probability *simpliciter* is "that evidence, which is still attended with uncertainty," where "evidence" has its eighteenth-century meaning, "a Quality in Things whereby they become visible and apparent."[35] Applying these distinctions to testimony, we have this result. When inference from testimony to belief amounts only to probability in the latter sense, the inference from testimony that p to p will only be an immediate inference to belief that p in case the testimony has a high degree of probability. Otherwise believing that p will need an accompanying reflection and conscious process of weighing of evidence. But if at the end of this process we come to see that testimony as a proof that p, our belief will be triggered, not as a direct result of the idea-idea inferences involved in the process of weighing evidence, but as a result of the impression-idea inference that occurs once we come to perceive the testimony as proof. If in the process of weighing evidence we are never led to see the testimony of p as proof of p, the impression-idea inference will not occur and, consequently belief will not be produced.

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[35] That peculiar meaning of "evidence" in Hume has been noted by the editors of the forthcoming critical edition of Hume's *Treatise* who in their annotation to T 1.1.4.4 say: "Malebranche had said that 'evidence (*l'evidence*) consists only in the clear and distinct perception of all the constituents and relations of the object necessary to support a well-founded judgment' (*Search* 1.2.3). Chambers, after first defining evidence as 'a Quality in Things whereby they become visible and apparent', went on to say that '*Evidence*, is the essential and infallible Character, or Criterion of Truth; and is that, in Effect, which with us constitutes Truth. If *Evidence* should be found in Propositions that are false, we shou'd be compell'd into Error; since the Assent we give to *evidence* is necessary' (*Cyclopædia*, 'Evidence')."

At the end of Part 1 of "Of Miracles" Hume says that a miracle, if it is really a miracle and not merely something unusual, is a "violation of the laws of nature", and that the "laws of nature" are probable assertions that amount to "proofs." From this he concludes that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior." (*EHU* 10.12)

It is also well known that Hume's argument provoked a stir, for his line of reasoning threatens to undermine the very foundations of the main monotheist religions. Among the many responses to the essay "Of Miracles," that written by George Campbell, one of Hume's Scottish "friendly adversaries," is of special interest for us. In his *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh, 1762), Campbell raised some of the most powerful criticisms of Hume's explanation of the connection between testimony and belief in the context of the discussion of the status of miracles.[36]

Campbell's criticism focuses on the assumptions at stake in Hume's procedure for weighing testimony.[37] His central arguments are directed against Hume's "axiom" that "the evidence of testimony is derived solely from experience."[38] Against this claim,

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[36] George Campbell, *A Dissertation on Miracles: containing an Examination of the Principles Advanced by David Hume, Esq. in an Essay on Miracles with a Correspondence on the Subject by Mr Hume, Dr Campbell, and Dr Blair*, [Edinburgh: G. Caw, 1812 (first published 1762)]. Excerpts of Campbell's essay can be found as an appendix to John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 176-193.

[37] "I should desire him to give a reasonable account of his faith in the clearest informations of his memory, which he will find it alike impossible either to doubt, or to explain. Indeed memory bears nearly the same relation to experience, that testimony does." *A Dissertation on Miracles*, p.1 9.

[38] *Ibid.*, p.18.

Campbell argues that, in fact, testimony is constitutive of experience, and hence it cannot be said that it is founded on experience without falling into a circular argument. Children, he contends, learn first to believe in testimony and only much later are able to be skeptical about stories told or alleged facts reported. Campbell contends that, contrary to Hume's suggestions, what we learn from experience is how to be diffident towards testimony.[39]

Furthermore, according to Campbell, Hume plays ambiguously on two senses of "experience". There is, first, *personal* experience, which Campbell claims is "founded on *memory*, and consists solely of the general maxims or conclusions, that each individual hath formed from the comparison of the particular facts remembered by him." Experience in the second sense is *derived*, and is defined by Campbell as "founded in *testimony,* and consists not only of all experiences of others, which have, through the channel, been communicated to us, but of all general maxims or conclusions we have formed, from the comparison of particular facts attested."[40] Campbell proceeds then to argue that if Hume's argument regarding miracles claims that we test testimony against "derived" experience then Hume is producing a circular argument, for derived experience is constituted by testimonies. If Hume is making his claim assuming "experience" stands for "personal experience", then our claims to knowledge must be, ridiculously, reduced to things of which we have personal memory:

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[39] *Ibid.,* p. 18. Thomas Reid makes a similar point when he argues, "if credulity were the effect of reasoning and experience, it must grow up and gather strength, in the same proportion as reason and experience do. But if it is the gift of nature, it will be strongest in the childhood, and limited and restrained by experience; and the most superficial view of human life shows, that the last is really the case, and not the first." Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense,* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, first published 1764), p. 195.

[40] *Ibid.,* p. 30.

[N]othing can be more limited, than the sense which is conveyed under the term *experience,* in the first acceptation [personal experience]. The merest clown or peasant derives incomparably more knowledge from testimony, and the communicated experience of others, than in the longest life he could have amassed out of the treasure of his own memory.[41]

C.A.J. Coady has recently revamped Campbell's argument in a book that deals at length with the epistemological problems related to the issue of testimony.[42] The main goal of Coady's book is to defend the epistemological relevance of testimony against a tradition that, he claims, describes knowledge as an enterprise centered on an autonomous knower. Although he acknowledges Hume's merit in being among the first philosophers to devote full attention to the philosophical importance of testimony, he builds his own thesis against Hume's position, which he characterizes as the "reductive thesis", and which, he maintains, plays the role of the "received view" in any philosophical account of testimony.[43] After restating Campbell's argument on the ambiguity of the notion of experience in Hume, Coady argues that although Hume recognizes the importance of testimony in informing most of our beliefs, he nevertheless maintains that a knower must validate every testimony by way of an inductive inference based solely on can be warranted by his personal experience.[44] For that reason, in Coady's view, Hume reduces testimony from a form of evidence to a species of inductive inference.

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[41] *Ibid.,* p. 30.

[42] C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study,* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

[43] *Ibid.,* p. 79.

[44] "My criticism begins by calling attention to a fatal ambiguity in the use of terms like 'experience' and 'observation' in the Humean statement of RT [the reductive thesis]. We are told by Hume that we only trust in testimony because experience has shown it to be reliable, yet where experience means individual observation and the expectations it gives rise to, this seems plainly false and, on the other hand, where it means common experiences (i.e. the reliance upon the observation of others) it is surely question-begging." *Ibid.* p. 80.

By arguing that testimony is intimately connected with the possibility of having a public language, Coady also deepens Campbell's suggestion that children first learn through testimony and only later acquire a capacity to assess critically reports.[45] According to Coady, were we to accept Hume's (alleged) explanation of belief in testimony as reducible to an autonomous inference performed by an individual knower, we would have great difficulty explaining how it is possible that we can share meanings in a public language. For the very process of learning a mother tongue involves accepting testimony. In other words, according to Coady, Hume fails to see that we cannot make sense of a totally autonomous knower, and that relative autonomy obtains only among individuals who are immersed in, and constituted by, a public language and a body of inherited shared beliefs. In other words, the critical assessment of testimony is something that happens within a context of inherited public beliefs. A purely autonomous knower having to evaluate testimony provided by others would be placed in the impossible position of one who tries to understand a radically alien culture. But, then, she either fails to understand the testimony *qua* testimony because of the lack of a shared language, or, were she to apply the principle of charity, she would necessarily be assuming shared beliefs (at least the ones that are necessary to understand testimony as ascriptions of belief) and abandoning the position that Hume (allegedly) invites us to assume.

The view Coady opposes to that of Hume is that of another of Hume's "friendly adversaries," Thomas Reid, who sees human testimony as standing in a position analogous to sense perception *vis-à-vis* experience and knowledge. Reid refers in fact to two kinds of testimony: the "testimony of nature given by the senses" and "human testimony given by language."[46] Understanding both testimonies involves, for Reid, a

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[45] C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony,* p. 91.

[46] Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind,* p. 190. The analogy thesis is also stated earlier in Reid's book: "There is much greater similitude than is commonly

complex process of understanding signs in which perception and language are brought into play. Reid claims that there are two modes of perception (original and acquired) and two kinds of language (natural and artificial) and that there is an analogy between original perception and natural language on the one hand, and between acquired perception and artificial language, on the other hand.

Original perception is constituted by sensations which are signs referring to objective things. The connection between signs and things signified is "real" and warranted by Nature, which also makes possible an innate ability to interpret these signs. Natural language is also composed of signs (body language, voice tone, etc.) that also stand in a real connection warranted by Nature to the things signified. Interpretation of these signs is natural and does not require experience. Acquired perception involves skilful perception of sensuous signs. Distinguishing a Cabernet Sauvignon from a Shiraz, for example, is an exercise of acquired perception. In the context of acquired perception, recognition of the connection between the signs and the things signified is not innate, but depends both on our innate capacity of having original perceptions and on the experience necessary to develop the perceptual skill. The signs of artificial language are articulated sounds "whose connection with the things signified by them is established by the will of men."[47] The conventional meanings of the signs are first learned through experience in the process of learning a mother tongue (learning in which natural language plays a central role). The relation between the conventional signs and the things signified is, thus, partly founded in our ability to understand

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imagined, between the testimony of nature given by our senses, and the testimony of men given by language. The credit we give to both is at first the effect of instinct only. When we grow up, and begin to reason about them, the credit given to human testimony is restrained, and weakened, by the experience we have of deceit. But the credit given to the testimony of our senses, is established and confirmed by the uniformity and constancy of the laws of Nature." *Ibid.*, p. 171.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

natural language, without which we could not learn our mother tongue, and partly founded on experience.

Following this account of perception and language, Reid suggests that we have a natural ability to interpret -- i.e. to grasp the *real* connection between signifiers and signified -- both the testimony of nature and human testimony. This ability is not ultimately founded on experience, but in the "general principles of the human constitution" established by the Author of Nature. Reid suggests that we have an innate ability to interpret sense perception and natural language and an acquired ability to interpret acquired perceptions and artificial languages, but that our acquired abilities ultimately rest on our innate ones.

With this story in hand, Reid intends to counter Hume's (alleged) claim that our interpretation of perception is immediate, whereas our interpretation of human testimony is founded on experience. For, he claims, our ability to interpret language is founded on two natural principles, the principle of veracity and the principle of credulity. There is both a natural inclination to tell the truth and to believe in what we are told. Although he accepts that there are and always be liars, no liar can consistently lie all the time.[48] Systematic lies, also, can only be the product of people exercised in the use of reason, not of children. As we can see, Reid's point here is similar to that made by Campbell two years earlier, namely, that the credibility of human testimony is a condition prior to experience and that, if there is something we learn by experience, it is how to be critical of testimony.

In Reid's view, all human beings, including "brutes, idiots and children," are in fact engaged in the same universal study of the language of nature, although they are distributed in different classes.[49] Progression in this universal study is measured by the

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[48] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

increasing ability, gained through experience, to use inductive reasoning to refine our interpretation of nature. The final class, of course, is the one filled with philosophers, moral and natural. What experience teaches us, in fact, is how to refine our original understanding of nature, in the same way that training enhances our capacity to make perceptual distinctions. But there is no room for being skeptical in the way Reid thinks Hume is skeptical. Past experience is not a *limit* for our ability to know the real connection between signs and reality, but a tool for perfecting our initial good grasp of this connection. Nevertheless, there is a dissimilarity to be noticed between perception and testimony. Reid claims that the language of nature speaks always the truth whereas human language makes room for falsity. Accordingly, while the source of error in perception can only fall on the subject's capacities (perceptual or rational), in human testimony, error may also come from without.[50]

Let us summarize the charges leveled against Hume. He is charged with making an ambiguous use of the notion of "experience" in such a way that it veils a fundamental difficulty in his account. Dismissing the idea that Hume could have meant "social experience" on account of the obvious circularity to which Hume's argument would fall, the critics interpret him as making the claim that our inference from testimony that *p* to belief that *p* is founded on personal experience. Having once thus characterized Hume's position, they proceed to list a series of objections. 1) Hume makes an unjustified distinction between the intuitive certainty yielded in sense perception and the probability of testimony. 2) Hume fails to recognize that testimony is constitutive of personal experience, in the sense that it is a condition of the possibility of having a public language and, thus, of understanding testimony *qua* testimony. 3) Hume's account leads to an unjustified skepticism about the connection between testimony and reality.[51]

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[50] *Ibid.,* p. 199.

[51] Coady also believes that admitting the irreducibility of testimony implies an anti-sceptical claim about the connection between testimony and reality: "Testimony

2.4 Testimony and evidence: Hume's position

What motivates the attack on Hume's position, including the contemporary attack by Coady, is, in my opinion, a faulty interpretation of Hume's skepticism. If we depict Hume's skepticism as one that arises naturally for someone who maintains that accounts of how we come to have beliefs cannot include anything external to personal mental states; then the critics are right in pointing out the problems inherent to so radical a skepticism. Essentially, a radical skeptic is the one that thinks that even the central presuppositions of our core conceptual scheme -- that there is an external world, that the future resembles the past, that language conveys meaning -- can be successfully challenged by skeptical arguments. Such skepticism, it is often pointed out, is self-defeating, for skeptical arguments can only be formulated *within* the very conceptual scheme they attempt to undermine and, therefore, can only lead to the paradoxical conclusion that if the arguments leading to radical skepticism are correct then they are unintelligible. In other words, the very conceptual scheme that becomes the target of radical skepticism is a necessary condition for the doubts of the radical skeptical making sense in the first place. The claim that accepting testimony is a condition of the possibility of having a public language seems to fall within this line of argument. For skepticism about testimony is, in the last analysis, an obstacle to recognizing testimony as a speech act and thus constitutes being skeptical about it in the first place.

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constitutes a serious stumbling block for the 'autonomous knower' (...) since there must be at least the minimum connection between testimony and reality that the breakdown of the no-correlation possibility reveals [the implausible situation of making sense of testimony as a speech act while not accepting testimony as part of our inference, DP]. From what our discussion of that breakdown exhibited, we may well conclude that the connection has to be quite extensive." *Testimony,* p 96.

This criticism, however, misses the point of Hume's mitigated skepticism, which in general is aimed not at denying that our core beliefs are natural, but merely at showing that these beliefs cannot be explained or justified by reference to a special insight proper to an independent faculty of reason or to an assumed overall providential order. As we will see, Hume does not hold many of the theses that are ascribed to him by Campbell, Reid or Coady. On the contrary, he is in fact committed to the view that testimony stands on the same footing as sense perception insofar as each commands certainty and evidence. The real difference between the critics we have discussed and Hume will be shown to lie in the hypothesis used to explain our belief in testimony. Hume, unlike his Scottish critics, refuses to embrace providentialism.[52]

In order to show in detail how this interpretation misconstrues Hume's account of testimony, I will show that Hume was not committed to an inferential account of testimony, that he did not hold the thesis that sense-impressions have epistemic primacy over testimony and that, hence, he cannot be charged with defending the unsustainable idea of autonomy that is commonly ascribed to him. In other words, I will argue that Hume's account of testimony does not stand against common sense with respect to accepting the evidence of testimony

1. The first mistake in the interpretation I am criticizing consists in reading "Of Miracles" as advancing the claim that belief in testimony is necessarily arrived at inferentially. The mistake here is similar to the one pointed out above regarding Hume's paragraph on the assassination of Julius Caesar, namely, that of thinking, that by "inference" Hume must necessarily mean "deductive inference" or "formally valid inference" and that belief in testimony must therefore be the result or the product of such an inference. What Hume says regarding testimony is, however, clear:

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[52] This refusal, however, is perhaps better understood as directed at Hutcheson, Turnbull and Kames. Cf. David Norton, «David Hume»: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician, particularly chapters 2 and 4.

> [T]he evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience, and is regarded either as a *proof* or a *probability*, according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report and any kind of object has been found to be constant or variable. *EHU* 10.6.

When testimony amounts to proof, I submit, belief is produced unreflectively, whereas when testimony yields only probability, and especially a relatively weak probability, a conscious process of weighing takes place. It is easy to see that we would not think twice before betting a substantial amount of money against someone who denied that World War II occurred, whereas we will be more cautious in betting the same amount of money against someone who denied that Hernán Cortez burned his ships in Mexico. Although in the latter case we know the fact is well attested, we would easily acknowledge the possibility that reports had exaggerated the determination of Cortez to prevent his soldiers from retreating. If the amount of money is enough to make us worry, we may even want to peruse the available documents to check for ourselves whether accepting the bet is worthwhile. In the latter case, of course, the process of reflection can be said to contribute to our believing the testimony. But only in the sense that idea-idea inferences may help us perceive the testimony as a proof and thus trigger an unreflective inference from that proof to the belief. If in "Of Miracles" Hume focuses so much in the procedure of weighing testimonies it is merely because the cases he is discussing, extraordinary events and miracles, require a conscious scrutiny. Indeed the very point of "Of Miracles" may be the contrary to that many critics of Hume (and some followers) attribute to him. Instead of claiming that our way out of credulity is an obsessive and unworkable personal test of every received testimony, Hume is claiming that our normal tendency to form belief by way of testimony is satisfactory, provided we do not extend it beyond certain limits, limits that, according to him, are transgressed in the case of reports on miracles.

With the distinction between testimony yielding either proof or probability in mind, most of the criticisms of Hume presented above lose their foundation. For Hume is certainly not claiming that belief in testimony is always consciously controlled by

rational inference. He is only saying that enlightened individuals must in some contexts set limits to their natural tendency to believe in testimony. This is Hume's point when he holds that a mature knower, a wise man, must proportion his belief to the evidence (*EHU*, 10.4). For a mature knower, unlike a child, knows by experience that our natural tendency to believe in testimony needs sometimes to be corrected.

2. The second mistake lies in attributing to Hume the thesis that impressions of the senses and ideas of memory have epistemic primacy over testimony, not to mention an exclusive right to determine belief. Although there is no clear statement by Hume that he thought belief resulting from, or caused by testimony to be epistemically equivalent to belief caused by impressions of the senses or ideas of memory, there are many indications that leave little room for doubting that this was his view. The first hint in that direction comes from *Treatise* 1.3.4.2, where it is suggested that our perceiving the characters and letters of a certain book of history is sufficient for triggering our belief that Caesar was killed in the senate-house in 44 BC. However, given that my discussion of the status of testimony is meant to complete my elucidation of that passage I will not use it here as part of my argument.

One good indication that Hume was not committed to the Exclusion of Testimony thesis is his disagreement with Locke and Craig over whether evidence from testimony diminishes in proportion to the number of testimonies existing between the eyewitness and the present reader of history. Locke's version of the argument contends that the farther a testimony is removed from the "original truth" the weaker is the evidence that the testimony conveys.[53] Implicit in this argument is the claim that "no *Probability* can arise higher than its first Original," or, in other words, that testimony and, particularly, successive testimony, can never produce the same

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[53] Locke, *Essay*, 4. 16. 10.

certainty as personal observation. [54] Were Hume to hold the Exclusion thesis, we would expect a similar argument on his part.

Hume argues, instead, against the diminution argument, claiming that it is possible to conceive how successive testimony can preserve certainty. In that section of the *Treatise* where he discusses "unphilosophical probability", Hume presents a different version of the diminution argument, one which does not entail the counterintuitive claim that all history loses its evidence in proportion to the distance in time from the original fact. After discussing two other instances of probable inferences losing their vivacity due to "interferences" in the chain of reasoning, Hume presents a third case in which it is suggested that "tho' our reasonings from proofs and from probabilities be considerably different from each other, yet the former species of reasoning often degenerates insensibly into the latter, by nothing but the multitude of connected arguments" (*T* 1.3.13.2). He then presents what at first sight looks like a restatement of Locke's claim:

> 'Tis from the original impression, that the vivacity of all the ideas is deriv'd, by means of the customary transition of the imagination; and 'tis evident this vivacity must gradually decay in proportion to the distance, and must lose somewhat in each transition (*T* 1.3.13.2).

The distance Hume has in mind, however, is not distance in time, but distance in the inferential chain. We see, in fact, that the discussion of this kind of unphilosophical probability mirrors the argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1, where Hume undertakes to show how his own conception of belief can meet the skeptical objections against probable reasoning. The skeptic claims that beliefs are arrived at inferentially and that inferences to belief introduce intermediate steps that (because they add probabilities to probabilities) weaken the original idea. Hume replies that precisely because belief is "*more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*", it is

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[54] Locke, *Essay,* 4. 16. 11.

not to be viewed as the product of reason but, rather, as a manner of conception that arises unreflectively when the proper conditions obtain (*T* 1.4.1.8). What may affect the vivacity required to yield belief is the presence of a long chain of inference, so that some demonstrative inferences, if long and complicated, produce less conviction than some probable assertions.

What Hume foresees in *Treatise* 1.3.13.4-6 is the possible association of the argument of 1.4.1 with that of Locke and Craig about the diminution of evidence in history. Indeed, that is perhaps one of the reasons why he dissociates his argument from theirs.[55] Hume acknowledges that his conception of belief as a particular vivacity by which an idea is conceived must allow decay in vivacity in long inferential chains, for otherwise belief would be something other this vivacity, but, he contends, this does not imply a thoroughgoing historical pyrrhonism of the kind implicit in Craig's argument (*T* 1.3.13.4). For that an inferential chain is long is not itself sufficient to produce decay in evidence. In order to diminish the certainty of an original belief, the inferential chain must also be intricate, i.e. it must involve difficult thought transitions. This is not, however, the case with history: "tho' the links are innumerable, that connect any original fact with the present impression, which is the foundation of belief; yet they are all of the same kind, and depend on the fidelity of printers and copists"(T 1.3.13.6).

We find, for instance, that our belief that "Caesar was killed in the senate-house in 44BC," is equally simple for us to believe by way of a transition through one

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[55] David Wootton suggests that the "celebrated argument against the *Christian Religion*" Hume refers to in *T* 1.3.13.5 is not directly Craig's but, rather, a version of it that Hume may have read in Fréret's *Réflexions sur l'étude des anciennes histoires et sur le degré de certitude de leurs preuves*, first published in *L'histoire et les mémoires de l'académie royale des inscriptions et belles lettres*, 6 (1729), pp. 146-189. Cf. David Wootton, "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion," *Studies in the Philosophy of Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M.A. Stewart. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 201.

testimony that " Caesar was killed..." as by many identical testimonies. If all the testimonies are coincident, then another inferential transition from the text of a history book to a particular historical belief produces no new complication, and hence does not produce any diminution in the certainty that it is attached to it. If the testimonies are discordant, however, our inference to the belief is rendered more complicated and final vivacity may be compromised:

> If all the long chain of causes and effects, which connect any past event with any volume of history, were compos'd of parts different from each other, and which 'twere necessary for the mind distinctly to conceive, 'tis impossible we shou'd preserve to the end any belief or evidence. But as most of these proofs are perfectly resembling, the mind runs easily along them, jumps from one part to another with facility, and forms but a confus'd and general notion of each link. By this means a long chain of argument, has as little effect in diminishing the original vivacity, as a much shorter wou'd have, if compos'd of parts, which were different from each other, and of which each requir'd a distinct consideration (*T* 1.3.13.6).

As can be seen, Hume's conception of the decay of evidence is closely tied to his peculiar conception of inference and not to any claim about the primacy of personal perception or memory, as is the case of Locke.[56]

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[56] This strategy is also what makes Hume's analysis of testimony in "Of Miracles" an original contribution despite the likeness it shares with similar accounts of miracles by Locke, Tillotson and Stillingfleet. Most of these accounts included as part of their argument the thesis that greater evidence for past facts comes from eyewitnesses and then decays through the multiplication of testimony (Cf. M A Stewart, "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M A Stewart (Pennsylvania: University Press, 1995), pp. 184-185. David Wootton is the only one to note this dissimilarity: "Where Tillotson's argument is primarily an epistemological defense of the primacy of sense experience, Hume's, like Arnauld's, is an argument about the conflict between our own experience of nature and the claims of other people." David Wootton, "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion," p. 207.

For a second argument against the Exclusion thesis, I can point to the several occurrences of the expression, "testimony of our memory and senses", in Hume's works.[57] The use of this expression can, of course, be taken as episodic and merely metaphorical without any serious implications for Hume's epistemology. I am, however, of the opinion that Hume's use of the phrase is more than metaphorical, that by it he reveals his endorsement of the analogy between testimony and sense perception. The reason it is so difficult to see why Hume would think of sense perception as being analogous to testimony is that it is frequently taken for granted that Hume's endorsement of the theory of ideas implies an endorsement of the theory of intuition that it is often associated to it. Clear and distinct sense perceptions produce, for Locke, simple ideas (which Hume calls 'perceptions') and "nothing can be plainer to a Man, than the clear and distinct Perception he has of those simple *Ideas.*"[58] It is not always noticed that Hume has, in fact, a more nuanced account of sense perception, one that allows for explaining how it is possible that in the case of a white surface illuminated with a red light we can nevertheless judge the surface to be white even though, in fact, our total impression of the surface is composed of impressions of red. This account is to be found in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" and, as we will see, parallels Reid's later distinction between original and acquired perception.

Although "Of the Standard of Taste" deals mainly with aesthetic taste rather than with sense perception, Hume nevertheless makes clear in the essay that he thinks of aesthetic taste as a sense, namely, as a faculty that is structurally analogous to other perceptual senses. It must be noticed, though, that Hume's general understanding of what a sense is here seems to be modeled after his understanding of the moral sense. The analogy between the moral sense and the aesthetic sense is, after all, something Hume borrows from Hutcheson, who saw our ability to perceive the moral character

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[57] This locution can be found in *T* 1.4.2.20 and *EHU* 4.3, 7.29, and 12.22.

[58] Locke, *Essay,* 2.2.1.

of an action as analogous to our ability to perceive the beauty or ugliness of an aesthetic object.[59] If we take the moral sense as the model of a sense for Hume, there is an interesting feature that comes to the fore. Neither the moral sense nor the aesthetic sense are merely passive faculties receiving impressions; they also produce judgments.

One of the most interesting facets of the moral sense theory is that it blurs the traditional distinction between perception and judgment. To perceive a moral object is to perceive the moral goodness or evil of an action. In this sense Hume's endorsement of the moral sense theory can be seen as perfectly compatible with his epistemology and metaphysics. For the notion of a sense that is both passive and active is a perfect match for Hume's conception of reason as it is outlined in the footnote to *Treatise* 1.3.7.5. In this footnote Hume points out a "remarkable error" of almost all the logicians of his time:

> This error consists in the vulgar division of the acts of the understanding, into *conception, judgment* and *reasoning*, and in the definitions we give of them. Conception is defin'd to be the simple survey of one or more ideas: Judgment to be the separating or uniting of different ideas: Reasoning to be the separating or uniting of different ideas by the interposition of others, which show the relation they bear to each other (*T* 1.3.7.5 n. 20).

Against this standard view, Hume observes that if one adheres to the theory of ideas and to a naturalist account of their origin, then it should be denied that in judgments like "God is" there are two separate ideas, one of God and another of existence. Since we cannot form an independent idea of existence without the thing of which existence is predicated, the idea of existence in the judgment "God is" cannot be distinct from

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[59]Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue; In two Treatises. I .Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design. II. Concerning Moral Good and Evil,* 1738 (fourth edition), p. 73.

the idea of God. It follows, according to Hume, that it is possible to have judgments, and thus the exercise of an understanding, without more than one idea. It is equally true for Hume that "[a]s we can thus form a proposition, which contains only one idea, so we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium betwixt them" (*T* 1.3.7.5 n. 20). This can be shown by the ordinary use of enthymematic arguments and, most fundamentally, by our constant use of causal reasoning. In the same footnote Hume concludes thus that:

> What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects. Whether we consider a single object, or several; whether we dwell on these objects, or run from them to others; and in whatever form or order we survey them, the act of the mind exceeds not a simple conception; and the only remarkable difference, which occurs on this occasion, is, when we join belief to the conception, and are perswaded of the truth of what we conceive.

David Owen stresses the immense consequences of what Hume says in this footnote. First, Hume gives up the distinction between faculties within the understanding. Perceiving, judging and reasoning are three different manifestations of the same activity: conceiving.[60] Secondly, inferences are nothing else but the conception or the seeing of a complex idea.[61] Another way of putting what Hume intends by his comments on logic and reason is to say that he views what the tradition calls different faculties as merely the different levels at which we capture the inferential articulation of concepts. Straightforward perception, i.e. having an impression of the senses,

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[60] David Owen, *Hume's reason*, pp.74-75.

[61] Owen claims that for Hume, "[k]nowing something just is seeing that one idea is suitable related to another. Hume saw such relations of ideas to be just another complex idea ... Inferring one proposition from another just is seeing that one idea is suitably related to another, but so is judging a proposition (at least a non-existential proposition) to be true." *Ibid* p. 81.

implies "conceiving" something in its immediacy, as when for example we perceive a red surface. Judging that this surface is in fact white involves "correcting" the initial impression by putting it in a larger inferential context – seeing for example that there is a red lamp pointing at the surface and knowing that white surfaces appear red when illuminated by a red light. However, we do not judge the surface to be white as a result of a distinct inference. We merely perceive it to be so when we are able to place our impression in the larger inferential context or, in simpler language, when we have learned that surfaces are not always the color they appear to be. Reflective reasoning ("seeing" at once both that the surface is white and the reasons why we conceive it to be white) may later make explicit the inferential context that was only implicit in the perceptual judgment, but we do not need such reflection to conclude that the surface is really white.[62]

"Of the Standard of Taste" is an attempt to show that, notwithstanding the varying, culturally based inclinations and dispositions displayed in different countries and different historical periods, there are general rules by which an objective standard of aesthetic judgment can be attained. These general rules, however, ought not to be taken as "fixed by reasonings *a priori*" or as "abstract conclusions of the understanding." Their "foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience." [63] To attain an objective point of view in aesthetic criticism requires practice or education. By practice we educate the organ to make subtler distinctions and to perceive differences where originally none was apparent.[64] A case in point is the ability to taste wine. In that case, both a practice of tasting and knowledge of how

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[62] The conclusion about the killing of Caesar is an instance of the process I am describing. Testimony allows us to "perceive" or conceive that Caesar was murdered in 44 BC with the vivacity necessary for believing this fact. But then we can also "see," if required, the reasons why join belief to this conception: we see that there is a chain of testimony linking the fact reported with the history we are now reading.

[63] "Of the Standard of Taste" E-ST, p. 231.

[64] E-ST, p.237.

wine is produced and the variety of conditions (vintages, climate, etc.) that affect the final product are necessary in order to produce the "delicacy of taste" proper to the connoisseur. The experience required to form a reliable standard involves both personal practice and learning the practice of others.[65] Hume's argument shows that by acquiring experience, both personal and interpersonal, one acquires an objective standpoint or the unprejudiced point of view of "man in general" without departing entirely from one's personal preferences.[66] An expert, therefore, is someone that perceives with knowledge, where knowledge is a set of skills and beliefs acquired through personal and inherited historical experience.

Hume supposes that this account of expert perception in aesthetic judgment can be easily transferred to the whole of sense perception, for he finds a "great resemblance between mental and bodily taste."[67] In ordinary perception a correction takes place when ordinary conditions of perception do not obtain:

> A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavours; nor would one, affected with the jaundice, pretend to give a verdict with regard to colours. In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment. If, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence derive an idea of the perfect beauty; in like manner as the appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour, even while the colour is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses (E-ST, p. 233-234).

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[65] "One accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the productions of genius." E-ST, p. 238.

[66] For a discussion of "Of the Standard of Taste" that stresses Hume's mechanism for correcting prejudice in the moral and religious domains see, Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 117-167.

[67] E-ST, p. 235.

The kind of correction Hume is referring to here can only be carried out by someone who has the required experience. In other words, an expert in color perception is someone who not only passively receives color impressions, but is also one who implicitly judges according to background knowledge of, say, the normal conditions of observation, the kind of situation that may render our visual information unreliable, etc. This "reasoning" is not conscious reasoning, but is constituted by the implicit inferences contained in an act of expert perception. The more experience (both personal and socially shaped experience) relevant to a particular kind of sense perception we possess, the more nuanced the perception becomes. We can, for example, conceive something to be white at different levels: from an initial instance in which this conceiving of something to be white appears to be unrelated to anything else, to more complex instances in which the perception that something is white is the implicit result of our ability to use knowledge in order to conceive something to be white even though it looks red.[68]

As we can see, experience is also at the basis of straightforward sense perception and, therefore, sense perception *qua* belief forming mechanism is in all relevant points analogous to testimony. As is the case with testimony, we can rely on our senses and be mistaken. Our ability to correct perceptual errors also depends on our knowledge and personal training in the use of the senses. Furthermore, in perception, as in testimony, the more we depart from our purely personal point of view, the more likely we are to reach more objective standards of accuracy.[69] There is not even a place in the Humean account for the dissimilarity allowed in Reid's account, namely that the testimony of nature, unlike human testimony, is never misleading. For Hume, who

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[68] It is very difficult to imagine, though, a situation in which no knowledge at all is involved in the perception of something as white.

[69] Such are, for example, the standards of a scientist who finds, as a means of assessing colors, spectrum analysis more reliable than her eyes.

disposes of the providentialist assumptions at play in the very idea of a trustworthy language of nature, the reliability of the senses stands exactly on the same footing as the reliability of human testimony. If I am right in my account of sense perception in Hume, then there is little room for holding the thesis of the primacy of sense perception over testimony.

One can rightly ask at this point the question Antony Flew raised to show his skepticism *vis-à-vis* interpretations that challenge the standard view that Hume adhered to a private conception of experience. If such interpretations are right, said Flew, "then Thomas Reid must have devoted most of his professional life to dismembering a straw man."[70] For if Hume is committed to the idea that experience is socially constituted and believes that testimony is analogous to sense perception, why would not such common-sense philosophers as Reid think of Hume as one of theirs? Part of the answer to Flew's question is that philosophers like Campbell or Reid did, to a certain extent, argue against a straw man. They misunderstood the nature and purpose of Hume's skepticism by assuming that Hume was a radical skeptic. Had they understood Hume's skepticism to be a mitigated one, they, as well as Flew, would have realized what the real difference between them was about. Hume's skepticism is in general directed against those who gave a providential foundation both to metaphysics and to morals, a trap into which such philosophers as Hutcheson, Turnbull and Kames had fallen well before Reid and Beattie had taken up Hume's challenges.[71] For the rest, I believe, Hume's account of belief is a perfectly commonsensical one.

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[70] Antony Flew, "Impressions and Experiences: Public or Private," *Hume Studies*, 11.2 (1987): p. 183.

[71] I side with David Norton's account of Hume's skepticism, as found in his, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Norton gives another interesting account of Hume's anti-providentialist strategy in "Hume, Human Nature, and the Foundations of Morality," *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David F. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 148-181. Jenniffer Herdt also emphasizes Hume's anti-

2.5 Conclusion

I have argued that we can make sense of Hume's account of historical beliefs provided we revise some substantial, and unfounded, assumptions about his theory of belief. These assumptions are 1) that Hume is concerned with justifying historical beliefs; 2) that he believes causal inferences are necessarily unidirectional; 3) that he endorses a formal conception of the validity of inferences; 4) that he shares the traditional distinction between faculties (perception, understanding and reason); and 5) that he supposes that the epistemic primacy of sense perception entails the exclusion of testimony in reliable processes of belief formation. Hume's account of historical beliefs, as it is revealed by my analysis, is construed as a description of the kind of inferences that are involved in belief-formation processes about past matters of fact. I have also showed that, because Hume thinks inferences from causes to effects and effects to causes are epistemically symmetrical, and because he believes human testimony to be analogous to the "testimony of our memory and senses," his account of historical belief is not substantially different form his account of belief in general. The role of the inferences implicit in the process of forming beliefs about past matters of fact is in all points comparable to the role of inferences implicit in the process of forming beliefs about future matters of fact. In both cases we have an impression-idea inference. This fact explains why Hume thought he was perfectly entitled to begin his analysis of the structure of inferences leading to belief by giving an example borrowed from history.

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providentialist stance, although she does not link this discussion with the issue of the nature of Hume's skepticism. See chapter 2 of *Religion and faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy.*

Chapter 3

Sagacity and sensibility: Humean explanations

3.1 Introduction

One of the main obstacles to an appreciation of the role of historical knowledge in shaping many important features of Hume's philosophy is the view that his commitment to a covering-law model of explanation disqualifies Hume's philosophy from giving adequate explanations of historical facts. Such an approach tends to reduce explanations in history and morals to those of the natural sciences, where events are said to be explained when they can be shown to be derived from the application of known laws to known initial situations. Interestingly, the view that Hume adopted a covering-law approach to explanation is comforting both to the traditional defenders of Hume as the founder of an approach to philosophy centered on the epistemological problems proper to the natural sciences, and to who criticize Hume precisely for ignoring or simplifying most of the problems proper to the social and human sciences.

This picture of Hume as a defender of a covering-law approach to explanation is typically expressed in two different ways. The first, advanced by such critics of Hume such as Collingwood, Leon Pompa and Christopher Berry,[1] holds that Hume intended to apply the experimental method of natural philosophy to historical knowledge, and that his use of the principle of the uniformity of human nature aims at providing historical explanations with a law-like regularity that makes valid explanatory deductions possible. These interpreters also claim that Hume's attempt to explain

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[1] Christopher J. Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)..

historical facts by the standards of the natural sciences leads historical explanation to a dead-end; for this model of explanation works only on the assumption that there are ahistorical laws of human nature that allow us to "cover" historical phenomena. The second strand of this interpretation is to be found in the work of Beauchamp and Rosenberg, who provide a thorough and plausible defence of the covering-law interpretation of Humean explanations.[2] Beauchamp and Rosenberg were, however, sufficiently acquainted with Hume's writings to note that his explanations in the *History of England* do not fit the covering-law model. This they explain by saying that history does not lend itself to covering-law explanations, and thus Hume had to be satisfied with second best explanations in his *History*.

Another strand of Hume scholarship contends that Hume has a distinct approach for understanding and explaining in morals and history, an approach wherein the principle of sympathy plays a central role. James Farr, Spencer K. Wertz, Donald Livingston, and Jennifer Herdt maintain in various ways that Hume has a distinct method of explanation in history, a method in which sympathy plays a role commensurable to a modern version of a hermeneutical principle, namely, Diltheyian *Verstehen*.[3]

In this chapter I begin by discussing these two versions of the covering-law interpretation, arguing that there is ample evidence in Hume's writings to show that he

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[2] Tom L. Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[3] James Farr, "Hume, Hermeneutics, and History: A "Sympathetic" Account," *History and Theory* 17, no. 3 (1978): pp. 285-310, S. K. Wertz, "Hume, History, and Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 481-96, S. K. Wertz, "Moral Judgments in History: Hume's Position," *Hume Studies* 22, no.2 (1996): 339-67. Both articles are reprinted with some modifications in Spencer K. Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History: Historical Theory and Practice* (Lanhan: University Press of America, 2000). Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

never intended, as the first version of that interpretation contends, to reduce historical explanations to covering-law explanations. I also argue that though the reading of Beauchamp and Rosenberg, which recognizes that historical explanations in Hume are not covering-law explanations, constitutes a plausible interpretation of parts of his work, this interpretation fails to recognize the importance of historical explanations for Hume's philosophy. I also present the views of the defenders of the *Verstehen* reading. Here I recognize a significant contribution to our understanding of the importance of the notion of sympathy for historical and moral knowledge in Hume. At the same time, I suggest that this interpretation concedes too much to the covering-law reading because it implicitly assumes that Hume has two different approaches, one for the natural sciences and another for the moral and historical sciences. Such a dichotomy, reminiscent of the distinction between *Geistes-* and *Naturwissensshaften,* is hardly compatible with Hume expressed commitment to the unity of all sciences in a science of human nature.

From this beginning I go on to present my account of Humean explanations, which is based in the legal-historical model I have sketched in chapter 1. I will advance the hypothesis that, for Hume, to explain is to give reasons for *perceiving* a situation as *p* rather than as *q*, and for *believing* that *p*. In this view, general rules (in which category Hume includes both "laws" and also popular maxims) are used as instruments that set the stage for a more refined description of a situation or as instruments for correcting unreflective perceptions. The general pattern Hume follows is not to apply laws to initial conditions but, rather, to refine general rules with the help of other relevant *contextual* information. It is a model of *sagacity* similar to that required to establish facts in a court of law. The understanding I propose of Humean explanations as modeled after legal and historical explanations has the advantage of showing the consistency of his approach to explanation throughout the different areas of knowledge that concern him. Moreover, it allows one to frame covering-law explanations as simpler cases of Humean explanations, that is, as cases in which very

little contextual information is necessary in order to perceive an event either as having occurred, as occurring, or as yet to occur.

Finally, I contend that although moral explanations do indeed give a central role to sympathy, it does not follow that they constitute a different type of explanation. Moral explanations are explanations of facts which require, for accurate perception, that one be not only sagacious, but also have an enlightened sensibility.

3.2 The "covering-law" interpretation

The first form of the covering-law interpretation, that endorsed by Collingwood, Pompa and Berry, suggests that Hume's account of historical explanation is to be reduced to a deduction of our historical beliefs from law-like regularities about human nature, applied to historical facts. These interpreters uncritically draw on a common interpretation of Hume as the founder of contemporary theories of causation and scientific explanation. Contemporary empiricists, notably Hempel, attempted to systematize Hume's views on explanation in what is widely known as the covering-law model of explanation. According to this view, scientific explanations are to be construed according to one of two models:

1) The deductive-nomological model, in which event is explained when it can be logically deduced from the conjunction of one or more initial conditions and one or more empirical laws (where laws assume a strict universal form).

2) The probabilistic model, in which an event is explained when its *likelihood* can be derived from the conjunction of one or more initial conditions and one or more probabilistic laws (stating a high degree of statistical probability of the occurrence of an event when determinate conditions obtain).

An important feature of these models is that to explain an event requires that we show the necessary or probable existence of that event when the conjunction between initial conditions and relevant laws obtains. This, in turn, involves the further claim that

explanation and prediction are essentially the same. In the case of a past event, to explain is to render explicit what should been have known in order to predict it.

In a highly influential paper Carl Hempel argued that all competing methods of explanation, particularly those used in the historical sciences, could be successfully reduced to one of the forms of the covering-law model.[4] Against the defenders of a special approach to explanation in the historically oriented human sciences, an approach in which explanations take the forms of uncovering the rationale of human actions or of teleological arguments, Hempel defended the methodological unity of the sciences by arguing that these "special" explanations are, in fact, disguised versions of the covering-law model.

Collingwood, Pompa and Berry credit Hume with the intention of applying the covering-law model to history. On this interpretation, Hume is presented as trying to explain historical facts in the same way he purportedly explains any other causal event and, for that reason, as importing to the historical domain the method of deriving explanations from the application of universal regularities to initial conditions. According to these commentators, this identification of the method of historical explanation with the method of natural philosophy is precisely what constitutes the main problem with Hume's account of history. For the use of nomological regularities -- that by definition are independent of any historical circumstance -- introduces an ahistorical element into the explanatory model of history.

The best evidence for the view that Hume adopts the covering-law approach in historical explanations is to be found in "Of Liberty and Necessity" section 8 of the first *Enquiry*. In that section, Hume says that the principle of the *constancy of human*

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[4] Carl G. Hempel, "Explanation in Science and in History," in *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. William Dray (New York & London: Harpers &Row, 1966), pp. 95-126.

nature enables us to believe not only in facts that belong to our personal experience, but also in those facts that, without being part of our personal history, are nevertheless in conformity with the general laws of human nature. To make a long story short, the principle of the constancy of human nature establishes that human beings possess a limited number of motivations for action, namely, the passions. Human action, regardless its situation in time or space, can be explained by appealing to this constant set of motivations. Thus, in the moral realm, the principles concerning the operation of the passions play a role analogous to the one physical laws play in scientific explanations. As it is unnecessary to witness the fall of physical bodies to explain free fall, it is equally unnecessary to be a direct witness of an historical event in order to explain it. Historical events can be explained, according to Hume, because it is possible to single out the motivations that cause them.

There is, though, something puzzling about this model of historical knowledge. For historical explanations result from the application of principles that assume that human nature is unaffected by history. On the one hand, the application of the principle of the constancy of human nature would give to historical explanations a scientific status. On the other hand, the application of this principle would deprive history of any significance, for nothing in history would be meaningful if it were not meaningful to a modern observer. History would thus become a totally contingent set of contextual circumstances in which the same type of motivations bring about the same type of actions. Hence, it is not surprising that the passage of the first *Enquiry* in which Hume expresses the principle of the constancy of human nature is used as evidence by those holding that Hume's epistemology is clearly ahistorical. Hume says:

> It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: The same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit; these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprizes, which have

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ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations, which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These 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. Nor are the earth, water, and other elements, examined by Aristotle, and Hippocrates, more like to those, which at present lie under our observation, than the men, described by Polybius and Tacitus, are to those who now govern the world (EHU 8.7).

If one focuses only on what is said in this paragraph, it seems that there is no alternative but to admit that Hume presents us an explanatory model of history that works on the basis of a law-like principle, the principle of the constancy of human nature, that is clearly ahistorical. In this picture, one can only explain an historical event when it is possible to consider it, *mutatis mutandis,* as a contemporary event. This explanatory model seems to be applicable without further qualification to events occurring in different cultures and in different historical periods.

Collingwood, Pompa and Berry believe that the uniformity thesis represents Hume's final word about history, and that the adoption of this thesis, because of its ahistorical assumptions, disqualifies Hume as a philosopher of history.[5] How can someone who

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[5] Berry claims that "Hume has a non-contextualist theory of human nature," and that "Hume's delineation of the content, of what is constant in human nature, is extensive and reveals that human nature for him is no mere residual cipher, although such an ascription is implied by those recent commentators who wish to correct the common

entirely disregards historical contexts and historical points of view pretend to produce satisfactory historical explanations? It may well be the case that we can reduce historical events to instances of general laws that state the causal relation between certain motivations and certain actions, but in what sense would these "explanations" contribute to our knowledge of history? In what sense would any statement about the relation between an ambitious character and the kinds of action performed by persons having such character help to explain Napoleon's campaigns? As we will see, however, another line of interpretation holds that we need to re-assess the importance of the uniformity thesis for Hume. Uniformity is only a minimal requirement designed to render intelligible past actions or events to a contemporary historian.

We need now to distinguish between two versions of the uniformity thesis. The first, requiring maximal uniformity, holds that the same causal principles that explain contemporary actions can be used to produce exhaustive explanations of past events, and vice versa. The second, requiring minimal uniformity, claims that *at least* some common transhistorical features are required in order to make historical facts intelligible for us. If human beings were absolutely different between two different periods in history, it would be impossible to explain what happens in the first period to the people living in a second, later period. Among these necessary features are 1), the claim that there is a causal link between motivation and action, which makes an explanation of human actions possible; and 2), a list of passions common to human beings in all ages. The first version of the thesis implies that the list of passions exhausts all possible motivations for action. The only explanatory significance of

interpretation of Hume's theory of human nature as naively uniformitarian." Christopher J. Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), pp. 62-63. Collingwood holds that "Hume never shows the slightest suspicion that the human nature he is analysing in his philosophical work is the nature of a western European in the early eighteenth century, and that the very same enterprise if undertaken at a widely different time or place might have yielded widely different results." R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 83.

history for this thesis lies in the fact that it provides the variety of circumstances in which the passions yield actions. Unlike the maximal thesis, the minimal uniformity thesis leaves room for differences that are relevant to historical explanation. Although this thesis accepts that actions are always explained by their motivation and that a limited number of passions obtains, it posits that other contextual elements might also play an important role in historical explanation. For instance, differences in the central shared beliefs between two different periods or differences in the national character between two peoples may produce different outcomes given similar circumstances.

There is ample evidence that Hume was not committed to the maximal uniformity thesis and, for that reason, that he did not aim to reduce all historical explanations to covering-law explanations. First, as Donald Livingston pointed out, deriving the maximal uniformity thesis from the quoted paragraph can only be the result of a careless reading of "Of Liberty and Necessity".[6] A bit later in the text Hume claims that we should not "expect, that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length, as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions. Such a uniformity in every particular, is found in no part of nature" (EHU 8.10).

There is a second, subtler, argument against reading Hume as committed to the maximal uniformity thesis. This argument suggests that there are different levels of consciousness between human beings, and that these differences are to be considered when explaining their actions. This point, raised by Simon Evnine, consists in showing that both the human mind and human reason are, for Hume, historically modulated.[7] Evnine's paper focuses mainly on a footnote to "Of The Reason of

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[6] Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, pp. 217-18.

[7] Simon Evnine, "Hume, Conjectural History, and the Uniformity of Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): pp. 589-606.

Animals", section 9 of the first *Enquiry*.[8] In this text Hume deals with the task of explaining how human beings surpass animals and how one man surpasses another in understanding. The problem is the following: if reason is nothing but a set of customary transitions arising out of an experience of constant conjunctions, why should a human being be more intelligent than an animal or another fellow human being? In other words, how can differences in intelligence between two individuals having the same experience be accounted for in terms consistent with Hume's empiricist theory of causation and reason? Hume's answer consists in arguing both that there are differences in the natural abilities (such as memory or attention) between human beings, and also that experience is "expandable". In the footnote mentioned, Hume claims that once we solve the problem of historical evidence and acquire "confidence in human testimony, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of man's experience and thought than those of another (EHU 9.5 n.20)."

In a passage not discussed by Evnine, a passage found in "Of the Study of History," Hume restates this notion of "expandable" experience.[9] In this essay, Hume asserts that, given the shortness of human life and our limited knowledge, "we should remain for ever children in understanding" were it not for history "which extends our experience."[10] "A man acquainted with history," Hume says, "may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century (E-SH, pp. 566-567)." Admittedly, a person with more experience will have more information on which to

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[8] Evnine also discusses relevant passages from the *Natural History of Religion* and of Hume's discussion of the social contract theory.

[9] I return to this concept in chapter 4.

[10] Although not in reference to this passage by Hume, Donald Kelley points out that by the end of the Renaissance it was standard to claim, as Lorenzo Valla did in his *History of King Ferdinand of Aragon*, that "without history one remains always a child." See Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 189.

base decisions about actions than will a person with lesser experience. Given the same motivations and the same passions, these two persons may act differently in the same circumstances. Now, from this passage we can see that Hume supposes that human beings possess different experience in different historical periods and, presumably, that experience progresses with history. Accordingly, in explaining an action that took place in Athens in 500 BC one has to consider that the experience proper to a Greek is different from that of a modern European. Historical consciousness plays, therefore, an important role in historical explanation, a role that is overlooked by the defenders of the maximal uniformity thesis.

Last but not least, Hume's own racism, represented by a footnote to "Of National Characters," disgracefully shows that he was not seriously committed to the maximal uniformity thesis: he suspects, he says, "the negroes to be *naturally* inferior to the whites (E-NC, p.208 n.10, emphasis mine)." He also added in the same footnote that there "scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or in speculation ... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men."

Hume's constancy thesis, it is now clear, is intended only to establish the minimal conditions that make historical knowledge possible, for, unless we assume that there are some common features in human beings in all times and places, actions of remote people in a remote age would be totally unintelligible to us. This minimal requirement constitutes only the ground for a more subtle interpretation of history that includes, for Hume, the necessity of understanding how a constant human nature is nevertheless culturally and historically modulated. To make a more refined understanding of history possible, it is also necessary to understand the specificity of the culture and shared beliefs of different peoples. Human nature presents itself in specific "mixtures" in each culture or historical period. And some aspects of human nature are more uniform than others, as a passage from "Of Eloquence" makes clear:

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> Those, who consider the periods and revolutions of human kind, as
> represented in history, are entertained with a spectacle full of pleasure
> and variety, and see, with surprise, the manners and customs, and
> opinions of the same species susceptible of such prodigious changes in
> different periods of time. It may, however, be observed, that, in *civil*
> history, there is to be found a much greater uniformity than in the
> history of learning and science, and that the wars, negociations, and
> politics of one age resemble more those of another, than the taste, wit,
> and speculative principles (E-E 970).

Now, Hume's acceptance of historical modulations of human nature – modulations
deriving from national characters, the extend of experience, and natural abilities --
makes it clear that those contending that he intended to reduce historical explanations
to covering-law explanations are wrong. For if the principle that functions as a law-
like constant in our explanatory model is itself subject to historical variation, if the
principle is also determined by the phenomenon it attempts to "cover," then either it
has to be admitted that Hume's model is totally inept, or that one was wrong in
assuming that Hume is committed to a covering law model of historical explanation..

There is a second, more informed and more plausible defence of the covering-law
interpretation of Beauchamp and Rosenberg. Their interpretation takes into account
some of the objections that had been raised against Hempel's thesis.[11] They
acknowledge the problems inherent to a formal model of covering law explanations,
the deductive-nomological model of Hempel. This latter model has been challenged
for

1) Technical reasons – that for example it fails to provide the adequate sufficient
   conditions for explanation, thus allowing for absurd explanations.
2) Its inability to account for informal explanations, of the kind we find in history
   or in law.

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[11] See in particular chapter 8 of *Hume and the Problem of Causation.*

As for the technical objections to the model, examples can be given of series of sentences that satisfy the formal requirements of the model, but fail to explain the *explanandum*, raising thus the suspicion that the model does not succeed in capturing what it is to explain something. So, if to explain p is, for Hempel, to deduce p from the conjunction of a singular true sentence c and a universally quantified true sentence l, then we can construct an explanation from the following sentences:

(1) "The moon is devoid of life,"

(2) "Objects expand when heated"

(3) " The moon is devoid of life or is heated but does not expand."[12]

As (2) and (3) are true and (1) can be shown to be deduced from them, it seems that the conjunction of (2) and (3) has to be, according to Hempel, an explanation of (1). It is plain, however, that (2) and (3) do not meet our intuitions as to what is a correct explanation of "the moon is devoid of life."

Beauchamp and Rosenberg affirm, however, that this kind of technical problem can be circumvented if we drop the requirement that the *explanandum* be deduced on purely first-order logical grounds from the *explanans*. Another condition needs to be added to the set that defines the model, one that stresses that the *explanans* and the *explanandum* stand in some particular *causal* relation that cannot be expressed in first order logic. Hence, their basic claim is that a successful covering law model need not be a deductive-nomological model.[13]

The problems related to informal explanations are of a different order. Hart and Honoré had articulated these problems with great force in their classic book *Causation*

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[12] I borrow the example from Beauchamp and Rosenberg, p. 310.

[13] Ibid. pp. 312-14.

in the Law.[14]   They argued against what they took to be a Humean tradition, for the necessity of a contextualist approach to causation in disciplines like history and law. The reason is that in these disciplines, as in common sense causal judgments, the focus is not so much on explaining types of events as it is on explaining particular or singular events. Using the covering-law model in these contexts is not a good way of making sense of what it is to explain a particular event. Hart and Honoré argue that in practical contexts it is important to single out, among the potentially infinite antecedents of an event, those that explain why this particular event did, rather than did not, occur. The relevant "cause" of a building catching fire is not that the atmosphere contains sufficient oxygen to support combustion, but that, for instance, someone dropped a lighted cigarette on a carpet covering one of the floors. So a "cause" is something that responds not to the question, "why do events of the type E occur?" but, rather, "why did event E_1 occur?" Not "why do buildings burn?" but, rather, "why did this building burn?" On this account of the matter, that there is oxygen in the atmosphere is not a cause; it is only a condition. By distinguishing explanations attempting to cover types of events from explanations attempting to come to terms with singular events, Hart and Honoré shed light on the important distinction between causes and conditions that is to be used to find, among all the possible antecedents of a given event, the ones that are relevant for answering the question, why did *this* event occur. A natural law may be the relevant causal antecedent for explaining why a certain type of event occurs, but it becomes a mere condition when the attempt is to explain a singular event, even if the latter is covered by the same law.

Beauchamp and Rosenberg contend that the contextualist objections of Hart and Honoré miss the target because Hume "does not intend to analyze practical, historical, and legal judgments about causation; and there is no indication in his work that he

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[14] H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

regards the regularity theory as directly relevant to this task."[15] It is true, they agree, that in the life sciences and the social sciences other, competing models -- teleological or motivational -- of explanation seem to be more successful, or at least closer to common sense intuitions of what an explanation should be like. They claim, however, that teleological explanations can, in most of these cases, be reduced to what they think are Humean causal explanations and, where this is not yet possible, experience shows that it is only a question of time until causal explanations that dislodge teleological ones are found. Motivational explanations in the social sciences, they acknowledge, are more difficult to reduce to causal ones. The usual charge is that that all generalizations stating the connection between motives and action are analytical and so devoid of empirical content. Consequently, they must be ruled out as providing a covering law explanation, for these require that the law have empirical content. It is only possible to identify a motivation if it is also possible to identify the goal of the action (for goal directedness is part of what constitutes a motivation *qua* motivation). Now, "if a particular motive explains a particular action and the connection between motive and action is a logical one; the motive consequently cannot be the cause of the action." One way of solving the problem is to replace intensional descriptions of actions by extensional ones making use of the vocabulary of neurophysiology or behavioural psychology. Another solution would consist in specifying the conditions by which an action can be distinguished from the mere motion of the body without using the intensional language proper to talk about motivations or intentions.

Finally, that history usually proceeds by using contextual explanations neither involves a challenge to the covering law model nor entails that some empirical sciences do not deal with causal events. According to Beauchamp and Rosenberg, the difficulty in applying the covering law model to history derives from the limitations of our knowledge, not from the specific character of the subject matter of this discipline. Even if it cannot be ruled out that no laws of history could ever be discovered, we are

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[15] Beauchamp and Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation*, p. 293.

not now in a position to draw that conclusion and, therefore, no serious objection to the covering law model results from admitting this particular difficulty in the historical disciplines.

It is important to note, though, that Beauchamp and Rosenberg do not credit Hume with the use of the covering-law model in history. They recognize that Hume's histories contain "truths about particular events and their causes, even when we do not know the generalizations that on the covering–law model must connect them."[16] They think that Hume's strategy consisted in claiming that whenever causal regularities cannot be found it is merely because our cognitive limitations prevent us from knowing them. The use of alternative modes of explanation by Hume, like his motivational accounts of historical actions, does not reflect, they say, a departure from the covering-law ideal, but merely the use of second best strategies in cases in which that ideal cannot be met. They claim that we "can treat general conclusions about the relations between motives and actions as rough-and-ready approximations to the strict generalizations that underlie them."[17]

3.3 The "sympathetic" reading

Against the traditional positivist reading of Hume some interpreters have pointed out that the picture of Hume as the father of modern empiricism ceases accurately to represent him as soon as we consider not only the first book of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, but also his writings on morals and history. The central importance of morality, of sympathy as the grounding principle of human society, and of history is all too evident for anyone who dares to explore Hume's writing beyond what he says about causality, identity and the existence of the external world. James Farr, the initiator of the "sympathetic" reading, argued that what we discover in the unexplored territory of Hume writings on morals and history is that "Hume's philosophy harbors a

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[16] Ibid., p. 326.

[17] Ibid.

systematic ambivalence." The ambivalence Farr refers to is that between the methodological naturalism one finds in Hume's writings on epistemology and metaphysics, and the "hermeneutic" approach displayed in his treatment of morality. Farr claims that Hume "anticipated a hermeneutic or interpretative philosophy based upon a methodological appropriation of his principle of sympathy -- Hume's eighteenth-century prototype of *verstehen* [sic]."[18] Farr defends the thesis that Hume's sympathy is not the empathetic projection that has become the target of contemporary anti-psychologism but, rather, a hermeneutic principle of communication. It is a principle that permits one to "read" actions as being signs of motivations, and thus makes of the analysis of action not a causal analysis of the link between motivation and action, but, rather, a process of interpretation of signs typical of the hermeneutic circle.[19] Farr suggests that the "tension between the two models," the naturalist and the hermeneutical, need not be considered as a tension between two incompatible models "because aspects of both models are necessary for social-scientific or historical understanding and an adequate reconstruction of social life."[20]

Thinking of Hume as someone caring about the unity of social life also animates Donald Livingston's *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*. There the project outlined by Farr is developed at length and with greater interpretative accuracy. Livingston's book has, as one of its avowed goals, countering the positivist reading by attempting the first systematic study attending to the connection between Hume's philosophical and historical work.[21] Livingston also thinks of Hume's philosophy as displaying a duality between the methods of the natural and the moral sciences:

> Hume was the first to broach the question, in the form we have it today,
> of the status of causal explanation in the natural and moral sciences, and

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[18] Farr, "Hume, Hermeneutics, and History", p. 285.

[19] Ibid., pp. 292-3

[20] Ibid., p. 305.

[21] Livinsgston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life,* p. 2.

what appears to be his 'official' answer is on the side of the covering-law theorists. But the claims he makes for moral philosophy entail a quite different model of explanation, one which has obvious affinities with the covering-reason model.[22]

Livingston sees in Hume's philosophy the coexistence of two models of explanation, the method of covering-law in the natural sciences, and a distinct method in the moral sciences, one that aims at the *rationale* of actions. He also thinks that the way we understand natural events is significantly different from the way we understand moral and historical events. In the latter case, we have a special insight, sympathy, whereby "men are able to communicate to us the goods which are the objects of their actions." He even contends that for Hume "the unifying principle of human nature is not a set of regularities modeled on the principle of gravity, but the original principle of sympathy."[23]

Other authors, S.K. Wertz and Jennifer Herdt, for example, have underscored the importance of sympathy in Hume's understanding of history.[24] They see Hume's approach as markedly different from that depicted by the positivist interpretation, and offer a way of understanding Hume's philosophy as forming a coherent whole. I am in turn, "sympathetic" to this approach insofar as it has contributed to a better understanding of Hume's commitments in morals and history, thereby undermining the positivist reading of him. I am not satisfied, however, that the comparison of Hume to contemporary hermeneutics is always helpful. This is particularly true in the case of Farr, whose claim that Hume's account of the causality of action constitutes an application of the hermeneutic circle, seems to me an overstatement. In general, I think that the sympathetic reading concedes too much to the covering-law

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[22] Ibid. p. 197.

[23] Ibid., p. 222.

[24] Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History;* Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy.*

interpretation because it grants what I challenge, namely that Hume's explanations in the natural sciences satisfy – and were intended to satisfy -- the conditions of the covering-law model, while he took a different approach in morals and history. Although both Farr and Livingston resist the idea that the tension between the two models compromises the unity of Hume's philosophy, it is difficult to see how Hume's project of a unified "science of man" can coexist with the methodological dualism that is ascribed to him by the defenders of the "sympathetic" reading.

3.4 Sagacity and explanation

Part of the problem with both the covering-law and the sympathetic accounts is that they try to map Hume onto contemporary positions in the debate over the status of the human and natural sciences. Hume is thus seen as a defender of a unified strict science modeled after the method of contemporary natural science or as a defender of a separate contemporary approach, the hermeneutic *Verstehen*, to the human sciences.[25] It is not that such readings of Hume cannot help us thinking about the nature of explanation in the several disciplines to which he contributed, but it is important to realize that Hume's conception of explanation is substantially different in many respects from that of contemporary philosophers. Only when this conception is seen and appreciated will we be able to see the original contribution Hume can make to contemporary debates, a contribution that does not merely adumbrate current theories, but one which offers, because of its historical distance, a refreshing perspective on contemporary problems.

For that reason, it is important to place Hume in the context of the debates over the foundation of empirical knowledge as I have outlined them in chapter 1. Historical pyrrhonists, as well as many of the philosophers who attempted to respond to their

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[25] As I said earlier both Farr and Livingston believe, nonetheless, that the two approaches can coexist in a single science of human nature, although they maintain that Hume is a methodological dualist. Cf. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, pp. 196, 207.

arguments, viewed all epistemological problems in the context of their concern to bend the "new science" to serve the practical, rather than the speculative, interests of humanity. These philosophers were more concerned to describe how the mind works in what we now would call "contexts of discovery" than with justifying scientific theories. They were more interested in trying to describe how exactly the mind goes from one idea to another than in applying formal inferential procedures in order to legitimate already established knowledge. They were more interested too in understanding the concrete practices of validation of knowledge than in pontificating about the need to tie all these practices to purely rational criteria.

A close scrutiny of Hume on reasoning and explanation shows that he too was primarily concerned to account for informal explanations in ways that are typical of early-modern probabilistic thinking. An important feature of early-modern approaches to explanation is the fact that they are closely tied to an understanding of the nature of the inferences involved in explanations that considerably differs from contemporary formalistic approaches. I will consequently first account for Hume's understanding of the inferences involved in explanations, and only then show the conception of explanation resulting from this account.

3.4.1 Hume on inferences

As David Owen has pointed out, Hume's understanding of logic shares, as part of a tradition initiated by Descartes and Locke, a rejection of Aristotelian syllogistic logic as this was practised by scholastics.[26] The anti-formalism of this approach to logic also makes it alien to contemporary logic, which, because it is concerned with problems of justification, has in many ways reinstated formalism.[27] This informal

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[26] David Owen, *Hume's Reason*, particularly the Introduction and chapter 2.

[27] Robert Brandom's *Making it Explicit* offers a contemporary defense of material logic that in more than one sense can be said to be continuous with the thinking of

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logic does not focus on an elaboration of the precepts for just reasoning. Rather, this logic undertakes to describe how inferences are in fact made in common reasoning. Logic, for this tradition beginning with Descartes' *Regulae*, is not the search for the appropriate formal rules of inference. It is, rather, the quest for a method that leads to new knowledge. It seeks to be a logic of discovery, not a logic of justification. For Descartes, what is of central importance is the explanation of the process whereby we draw conclusions, the explanation of what an inference is. As Descartes puts it, in relying mechanically on learned forms of inference we take arguments to reach true conclusions by virtue only of their form. In doing so, we put reason, reason taken as a form of intellectual sagacity, "on vacation:"

> Our principal concern here is thus to guard against our reason's taking a holiday while we are investigating the truth about some issue; so we reject the forms of reasoning just described [the syllogistic of the scholastics, that is] as being inimical to our project. Instead we search carefully for everything which may help our mind to stay alert, as we shall show below. But to make it even clearer that the aforementioned art of reasoning contributes nothing whatever to knowledge of the truth, we should realize that, on the basis of their method, dialecticians are unable to formulate a syllogism with a true conclusion unless they are already in possession of the substance of the conclusion, i.e. unless they have previous knowledge of the very truth deduced in the syllogism, It is obvious that they themselves learn nothing new from such forms of reasoning, and hence that ordinary dialectic is of no use whatever to those who wish to investigate the truth of things. Its sole advantage is that it sometimes enables us to explain to others arguments which are already known. It should therefore be transferred from philosophy to rhetoric.[28]

Hume, too, thinks that the "sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas", and complains that "[o]ur scholastic head-pieces and logicians show no such superiority above the mere vulgar

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people like Hume, Arnauld and others. See Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*.

[28] Descartes, AT X 406.

in their reason and ability, as to give us any inclination to imitate them in delivering a long system of rules and precepts to direct our judgment, in philosophy" (T Intro 5; 1.3.15.11). It is not surprising, then, that several features of Hume's account of inference make it substantially different from contemporary views of this topic. I will review some of the most important.

1. *Two forms of inference are important for understanding Hume on explanation: impression-idea inference and idea-idea inference.* Belief-fixing inferences are inferences from an impression of the senses or to what Hume sometimes calls an "impression", sometimes an "idea", of memory" (see 1.3.4.1, 1.3.5.1). Thus in any inferential chain yielding belief we have either a simple impression-idea inference or a complex inferential chain that though constituted by many idea-idea-inferences must nevertheless be anchored in some impression-idea inference in order to obtain the vivacity proper to belief.[29] Belief differs from any other form of conception arrived at by pure idea-idea inferences in precisely that extra vivacity provided by the impression-idea inference that gives rise to it. As Hume puts it: "An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 1.3.7.5).

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[29] Hume makes this point at many places in the *Treatise*. T 1.3.4.1 is a clear instance: "Tho' the mind in its reasonings from causes or effects carries its view beyond those objects, which it sees or remembers, it must never lose sight of them entirely, nor reason merely upon its own ideas, without some mixture of impressions, or at least of ideas of the memory, which are equivalent to impressions. When we infer effects from causes, we must establish the existence of these causes; which we have only two ways of doing, either by an immediate perception of our memory or senses, or by an inference from other causes; which causes again we must ascertain in the same manner, either by a present impression, or by an inference from *their* causes, and so on, till we arrive at some object, which we see or remember. 'Tis impossible for us to carry on our inferences *in infinitum*; and the only thing, that can stop them, is an impression of the memory or senses, beyond which there is no room for doubt or enquiry."

2. Transitions between perceptions are made possible thanks to three basic relations: causality, resemblance and contiguity. Because Hume contends that all inferences are implicitly governed by the three natural relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation (T 1.1.4),[30] one may be tempted to describe Hume's view of logic as a reduction of the rules of inference to psychological laws of association. It remains, nonetheless, that despite their being based on psychological dispositions, the possibility of associating any two given ideas is also constrained by the ideas themselves. We do have a psychological ability to perceive resemblance, contiguity or causation, but that any two ideas resemble, are contiguous to one another or are seen as standing in causal relation, is something that depends too on the ideas in question. This is why Hume defines "reasoning" as "nothing but a comparison, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other" (T 1.3.2.2).

The possibility of making inferences is thus, on the one hand, constrained by our natural faculty of association and, on the other hand, by the concrete content of the ideas at work. In sum, *that* I can see that a zebra resembles a horse is something that depends on my built-in psychology, but *that* a zebra resembles a horse is something that depends on the ideas of "zebra" and "horse." Hume's understanding of the nature of inference cannot be labeled "psychologism" without strong qualifications. The caveat applies particularly to causal inferences, which according to Hume are "customary transitions" based on experience. Again, that we suppose that seeing one type of event, *B*, as always following another type of event, *A*, may have a "psychological" explanation, but *that* these two sets of events, and not many others,

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[30] Hume does in fact distinguish between the natural relations that are taken to be primitive features of human nature - the equivalent of the gravitational force in the mind-- and the philosophical relations (T 1.1.5), which are complex ideas we use in our voluntary thinking and that are formed thanks to the operation of natural relations. There are seven philosophical relations: resemblance, identity, space and time, quantity or number, quality, contrariety and causality. The account of causal reasoning and belief in matter of fact found in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* makes little or no use of this other set of relations.

appear to be so related is something that is independent of, and not reducible to, our psychology. Hume highlights this dual aspect of causal inferences in a brief summary of his theory of causality made in book two of the *Treatise*:

> If objects had not an uniform and regular conjunction with each other, we shou'd never arrive at any idea of cause and effect; and even after all, the necessity, which enters into that idea, is nothing but a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and infer the existence of one from that of the other. Here then are two particulars, which we are to consider as essential to necessity, *viz.* the constant *union* and the *inference* of the mind; and wherever we discover these we must acknowledge a necessity (T 2.3.1.4).

Hume's account of inference is psychological in the sense that it is based on a description of some psychological dispositions, but it is not *merely* psychological. Hume's account is at the same time epistemic, in the sense that it accounts for the fact that the way our psychology behaves with respect to its perceptions is also constrained by objective features of the world.

3. *Transitions can be easy or difficult.* Hume holds "as a general maxim in the science of human nature, *that when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity"* (T 1.3.8 2). Thus upon seeing that the streets are wet my mind is immediately transported to the idea that it has rained, and to many others that are immediately or mediately related to the impression I am currently experiencing. I can also think about bringing an umbrella and, if I am in a kitschy mood, the melody of "I'm Singin' in the Rain" may also come to mind. On the one hand, the ability to connect my present impression with other, related ideas depends on a number of psychological dispositions: "all the operations of the mind depend in a great measure on its disposition, when it performs them; and according as the spirits

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are more or less elevated, and the attention more or less fix'd, the action will always have more or less vigour and vivacity." On the other hand, these same psychological dispositions depend "entirely on the objects, about which the mind is employ'd" (T 1.3.8.2).

Transitions from one perception to another (from impression to idea, from idea to idea, or from impression to impression) thus depend both on objective features proper to the ideas involved and on personal dispositions: "The very nature and essence of relation is to connect our ideas with each other, and upon the appearance of one, to facilitate the transition to its correlative" (T 1.4.2.34). A detective may fail to see the connection between two leads because of lack of experience, insufficient education, or inattention. He may also fail to see the connection because the link may be so subtle or distant that it would have been difficult for anyone to discover. Crucial for understanding Hume on inference and logic is, we find, the distinction between easy and difficult transitions from one perception to another. For it is on the basis of this distinction that Hume elaborates the division between knowledge and probability, as well as his understanding of the different types of evidence and subjective certainty. Hume himself often uses the expression "easy transition" to describe how the mind passes smoothly and unproblematically from one idea to another.[31] Our customary experience of seeing one type of event, B, regularly follow events of type A is at the foundation of inferences from some present impression A_n to that of idea B_n by a natural and "easy transition" that conveys the force of belief.

In some circumstances, however, transitions can be rendered difficult or cause "uneasiness" in the mind. The concurrence of two relations, Hume claims, is essential to belief. These are the relations of causality, made possible by our experience of the constant conjunction of two types of event, and the relation of resemblance, whereby

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[31] Instances of this locution in the first book of the *Treatise* can be found at T 1.3.8.5, 1.3.9.9. 1.3.9.16,1.3.10.4, 1.4.2.35, 1.4.3.3, 1.4.6.7, 1.4.6.11, 1.4.6.16, 1.4.6.21.

we identify in a given circumstance that the events are of these two types. When these two relations comport with ease and they are tied to some impression, belief is produced. On the other hand, "If you weaken either the union or resemblance, you weaken the principle of transition, and of consequence that belief, which arises from it. The vivacity of the first impression cannot be fully convey'd to the related idea, either where the conjunction of their objects is not constant, or where the present impression does not perfectly resemble any of those, whose union we are accustom'd to observe" (T 1.3.12.25).[32] Hume gives many examples of such uneasy transitions, of transitions that in this way lack vivacity, in the *Treatise*. When discussing space and time he complains, for example of "the uneasiness [the mind] finds in the conception of such a minute object as a single point" (T 1.2.4.7). In his discussion of skepticism with regard to reason, he says:

> Where the mind reaches not its objects with easiness and facility, the
> same principles have not the same effect as in a more natural conception
> of the ideas; nor does the imagination feel a sensation, which holds any
> proportion with that which arises from its common judgments and
> opinions. The attention is on the stretch: The posture of the mind is
> uneasy; and the spirits being diverted from their natural course, are not
> govern'd in their movements by the same laws, at least not to the same
> degree, as when they flow in their usual channel (T 1.4.1.10-11).

And when discussing the identity of external objects:

> Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction
> either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness, whether
> it proceeds from without or from within; from the opposition of external
> objects, or from the combat of internal principles. On the contrary,
> whatever strikes in with the natural propensities, and either externally
> forwards their satisfaction, or internally concurs with their movements,
> is sure to give a sensible pleasure (T 1.4.2.37).

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[32] Hume repeats this claim in T 1.3.13.1.

4. *Certainty is a function of the ease of transition.* Hume construes the notion of certainty as a function of the relative degree of easiness or uneasiness characterizing thought transitions, transitions from one perception to another. In doing so he departs from the view, commonly held in the 17th and early 18th centuries, that degrees or levels of certainty are dependent on distinct *types* of knowledge. These commonplace accounts distinguished between:

1) Intuitive and demonstrative knowledge: that based on the comparison of ideas and providing absolute certainty.[33]

2) Sensitive knowledge: that based on sense information and providing (at its best) a high degree of assurance.

3) Moral knowledge: that based on testimony and providing at best a still lower degree of assurance, "moral certainty."

According to Hume, demonstrative knowledge is possible only when the relation we establish between ideas is independent of the manner or order in which these ideas appear to us. Thus, it is possible to say that two objects resemble one another regardless of whether we observe the objects simultaneously or distanced in time, whether they are contiguous in space or not, or whether they are upside-down.[34] The relations of *resemblance, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality,* and *contrariety* are, according to Hume, relations in which we consider objects

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[33]For ease of reference, I call these in some ways distinct forms "demonstrative knowledge."

[34] David Norton in his *Editor's Introduction* to the *Treatise* has made this point. Norton stresses that Hume's distinction between relations yielding knowledge and those yielding probability does not map, as is often claimed, onto a distinction between logical and factual relations: "Relations of the first type include *degrees in any quality* -- as when one item in a related pair is heavier or more intensely blue than another (see also 1.1.5.7) -- a decidedly factual or contingent matter, and hence we clearly need another description of the distinction Hume means to draw." See *Treatise*, pp. 124-5.

independently of the manner and order in which they appear to us (T 1.3.1.1). Only in those sciences dealing exclusively with this set of relations -- algebra and arithmetic for Hume -- can we "carry on a chain of reasoning to any degree of intricacy, and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty" (T 1.3.1.5).

The remaining disciplines deal with relations of *causation, identity*, and *situations in time and place*. These relations are altered by the manner and order of presentation of the objects to the mind. Thus, while we can perceive the *resemblance* between two objects regardless of whether the two objects are distant in space or were observed at moments distant from one another, whenever two perceptions are distanced in time or space the question of the *identity* will be raised. The belief in a causal relation between two types of event is also diminished by cases in which an expected event of type *B* is not observed to follow after an event of type *A*, or when *B* is observed only after an unexpected delay, or if the *B* in question should occur before some *A*. In those cases, as there is nothing in the objects themselves that would allow us to infer that one is identical to the other, or that one is the cause of another, we have only *probability* (T 1.3.2.1-2).

The distinction between knowledge and probability comes down, then, to the question of the stability of relations between perceptions. If these relations are immune to changes of order and manner of presentation, then they can provide *knowledge*. If they are not immune in this way, they can provide only *probability*. This suggests that the distinction between knowledge and probability is not, *per se*, a distinction between higher and lower levels of knowledge. The fact that some relations are unaffected by the manner and order in which perceptions appear to the mind tends to make the relevant inferential transitions generally effortless and, for that reason, make certainty easy to attain. But, as Hume points out, "uneasiness" is not excluded from the disciplines producing knowledge. He gives as instances demonstrative reasonings that, because they are long and intricate, may yield less conviction than probable beliefs of the sort: the sun will rise tomorrow. If a long chain of reasoning is composed of

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transitions that are similar to one another, then, the mind may carry these out without great effort or significant unease. Hume's response to the Locke-Craig claim about the decay of historical evidence (see chapter 2) shows how easiness of transition can be preserved when the inferences in a long chain resemble one another. My belief that Caesar was killed in 44 BC is not diminished when I determine that $Historian_1$, $Historian_2$ and $Historian_n$, each presumably depending on those who went before, each reports that Caesar was killed in 44 BC (T 1.3.13.5-6). The repetition may even increase my assurance as I realize that so many authorities share and support this belief.

On the other hand, Hume argues (T 1.4.1) that we have nothing like this facility of transfer in abstruse or long mathematical demonstrations. There the mind must apply itself to many different inferences before reaching a conclusion. We know by experience that when we carry out mathematical operations we can easily make mistakes, and thus we wait to verify the operations or, sometimes, to have them confirmed by others, before putting full confidence in the results. Even if the inferential transitions between mathematical objects are stable, the mind that carries out an inference stands in a causal relation to that inference: "Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented" (T 1.4.1.1). Thus, to any demonstrative inference is joined a probable one: in the demonstrative sciences there is only a constant conjunction between the mind's inferences and the truth of those inferences. Given that we cannot obliterate the fact that all our demonstrative inferences ultimately rest on a merely probable causal judgment, it follows that, "all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question" (T 1.4.1.1).

If we also recall from chapter 2 that Hume does not give preference to physical evidence (evidence derived from the senses) over moral evidence (evidence derived from testimony), then we can see that the Lockean account of the kinds of knowledge collapses. Hume, along with Pierre-Daniel Huet and Nicolas Filleau de la Chaise, puts historical or moral knowledge on the same footing with the knowledge produced in the natural and demonstrative sciences. Hume expresses this view with clarity in his *Letter from a Gentleman*:

> It is common for Philosophers to distinguish the Kinds of Evidence into *intuitive, demonstrative, sensible* and *moral*; by which they intend *only* to mark a Difference betwixt them, not to denote a Superiority of one above another. *Moral Certainty* may reach as *high* a Degree of Assurance as *Mathematical* ... (L 22).[35]

The crucial difference lies in the level of certainty that a given cognitive enterprise can attain. In this respect, the only a priori advantage of the intuitive or demonstrative sciences is that, though their certainty depends on the reliability of our abilities to make proper inferences, it is nevertheless independent of the manner and order of the perceptions involved. As these inferences are highly reliable, the general exactness of mathematics can be asserted. But so too are our causal judgments in other disciplines highly reliable, and they are so whether they are based on direct observation or on testimony. Many of our empirical beliefs are based, according to Hume, on extremely reliable inferences. The only substantial difference between these probable beliefs and intuitive and demonstrative knowledge is the fact that the inferences leading to the former can be mistaken because of a psychological failure (lack of attention, confusion, stress) and because of a cognitive failure (that is, because we failed to perceive a fact from the proper perspective, because someone else shows us that we

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[35] In the *Treatise* Hume insists on equating natural and moral evidence (T 1.3.14.33 and 2.3.1.17), but the argument for demonstrations collapsing into probability is given separately; see T 1.4.1. The first claim is restated in EHU 8.19.

were mistaken or had misleading information, because we relied on false testimony, etc.).

In the *Treatise* Hume distinguishes initially between *knowledge* and *probability*, meaning thereby only to mark the distinction between the kind of relations involved in mathematical inferences and the kind of relations involved in ordinary empirical judgements. However, if we take into consideration the sceptical argument used in T 1.4.1, the argument showing that intuitive and demonstrative reasonings resolve, in the final analysis, into probability, we are in a position to see that the crucial set of distinctions to which Hume sticks is that between *knowledge, proofs*, and *probability*:

> By knowledge, I mean the assurance arising from the comparison of
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> ideas. By proofs, those arguments, which are deriv'd from the
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> relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt
>
> and uncertainty. By probability, that evidence, which is still attended
>
> with uncertainty (T 1.3.11.2).

Knowledge and *proofs* differ only in the relations involved in the inferences -- "comparison of ideas" vs. "causation" -- but they both yield, unlike *probability,* the highest level of certainty. Hume is even likely to claim as Filleau de la Chaise claimed before, [36] that *proofs* can even rise to higher degrees of assurance than demonstrations: "We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others, and more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes" (T 1.3.7.5 n. 20). The reason is, again, that causal reasoning is often simpler than demonstrative reasoning, while it is simplicity that enables the mind to go easily from one idea to another, and it is just that easiness which makes certainty and belief possible. The divide between proofs and probabilities begins as soon as, in any inference, the mind encounters obstacles to

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[36] Nicolas Filleau de la Chaise, "Traité qu'il y a des demonstrations d'une autre espece & aussi certaines que celles de la geometrie."

the easy transition of thought (the result, perhaps, of difficulties in thinking, stress or fatigue, for example, or of difficulties in establishing the connections between the objects considered). Different degrees of probability reflect different degrees of uneasiness in thought transitions and, thus, progressive difficulty in obtaining belief.

5. *Implicit and explicit inferences.* Another important feature of Hume's account of reasoning is the distinction between implicit and explicit inferences. This distinction, originally proposed by David Norton, points to the difference between *reflexive* and *reflective* reasoning, between, that is, involuntary and voluntary "inferences."[37] Involuntary or reflexive inferences lead to such basic beliefs as those we have in external objects or personal identity, and also to such ordinary pre-reflective "inferences" as are implicit in a wide range of everyday actions. We believe that the post will deliver our letters or that a car will stop at the red light, and this without any conscious reflection on these matters. In these cases, "custom operates before we have time for reflection" (T 1.3.8.13). In such ordinary customary "thinking", according to Hume, "we make the transition [from perception to perception] without any reflection, and interpose not a moment's delay betwixt the view of one object and the belief of that, which is often found to attend it. As the custom depends not upon any deliberation, it operates immediately, without allowing any time for reflection" (T 1.3.12.7).

What Norton and Owen have insisted upon is that Hume thinks that reason, in the sense of explicit or reflective reasoning, plays a crucial role in correcting implicit reasoning. Some reflexive beliefs may reflect an insufficient experience and may prove harmful both for the person holding them and for the community surrounding her. Take the example of a stop sign at an intersection. Whereas a Canadian pedestrian

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[37] David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*, p. 209. The distinction is also operative in David Owen's account of Hume on reason; see Owen, *Hume's Reason*, p. 149.

might well reflexively expect a car to stop at the stop sign and, on this "assumption", would cross the street without caring about the car, that same expectation could be fatal for him if attempted in a country where drivers tend to ignore stop signs. The same holds for national or racial prejudices. Although some of these are "natural" in the sense that they are unreflective, they are not defensible and are totally unnatural for someone having a more cosmopolitan point of view. Reflective or explicit reasoning for Hume is, in short, a mechanism that enables us to revise or correct our imperfect, unreflective beliefs about many things. We sometimes need to consciously think in order to correct optical illusions and thus to perceive properly. This kind of thinking need not be opposed to reflexive or implicit inference, but, on the contrary, can be explained perfectly well in terms of our natural capacity to get accurate information about the world.[38]

3.4.2 Explanations and practical reasoning

According to this understanding of what inferences are for Hume we can now establish that, for him, to explain is to give reasons -- reflective judgments, that is -- for *perceiving* a situation as *p*, rather than as *q*, and for *believing* that *p*. An explanation is needed:

1) When reflexive inference is insufficient to beget belief.

2) When an expectation based on previous experience is not met.

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[38] David Norton, in his *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*, insists on the discontinuity between implicit and explicit inferences in order to ground his argument that Hume is a common-sense moralist and a skeptical metaphysician. Norton sees Hume as claiming that moral philosophy must reflect our implicit or reflexive responses to our moral environment but in metaphysics the philosopher must give vent to reflection even when it runs counter to natural beliefs, such as the existence of external objects and personal identity. I am here stressing the continuity between rational corrective strategies and natural reflexive reasoning in a way that seems to me neutral with respect to Norton's reading.

3) When there is a conflict of beliefs, such as there being two persons, one perceiving and believing that p, and the other perceiving and believing p_1, each will give reasons -- reflective inferences -- for perceiving and believing as he or she does.

Explanation is, thus, primarily elicited by practical considerations in the context of social interaction. Humean explanations typically answer the question: why should I perceive a state of affairs as such and such rather than otherwise? For that reason they are centrally concerned with accounting for singular events rather than for types of events, although, as I will show later, they can also do this second job. Hume's conception of explanation reveals the consistency of his approach with the legal-historical model I have described in chapter 1; it shows that that approach constitutes an important background for Hume's thought. For according to the account I am giving, Humean explanations seek primarily to *establish* facts, to inquire into the truth or falsity of events alleged to have occurred, and into the soundness of our expectations about events yet to occur.

Explanations in metaphysics follow, for Hume, a similar pattern. His explanations of identity, causation, of liberty and necessity, and of the idea of an external world are explanations in precisely the clarifying way I am describing. They seek to clarify the way we perceive these ideas in order to solve what look like irresolvable conflicts, "antinomies" Kant would say, between philosophical perceptions of these concepts. In each of these matters there is a conflict of beliefs that renders uneasy our perception of these key metaphysical ideas. Hume proposes solutions that show that the antinomies derive from inaccurate perceptions of these ideas. Antinomies of this kind are only irresolvable when they concern metaphysical puzzles with no connection with everyday life, but "if the question regard any subject of common life and experience; nothing, one would think, could preserve the dispute so long undecided, but some ambiguous expressions, which keep the antagonists still at a distance, and hinder them from grappling with each other" (EHU 8.1).

To give an example: for Hume, liberty is antinomically opposed to necessity only if we assume an unsustainable conception of necessity, that is, only if we assume that causes are occult powers. On that perception of what necessity is, since the power to produce the effect is already present in the cause, it is difficult to see how human actions can be said to follow from free will. For we would be determined to act in a particular way because that action already inhabits us as a causal power against which there is nothing we can do. But if we commit ourselves to the claim that causality is nothing but a customary relation established out of a customary experience of the constant conjunction of any two given types of events, then it is possible to claim at the same time that motivations and actions are causally related --there are discernable patterns of constant conjunction between them, that is -- *and* that actions follow from a free will, provided we do not understand by free will anything entailing that some events have no causes. If causality is nothing but the observation of customary connections between events, and if by liberty we mean merely "*a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will*", then the metaphysical puzzle dissolves and, as Hume says, "there is no subject of dispute" (EHU 8.23). The "explanation" here consists in arriving at a perception of human action that is not distorted, blurred or rendered uneasy by the traditional antinomy of liberty and necessity.

The role of empirical generalizations is also to be understood in the context of Hume's legal-historical understanding of explanation. Empirical generalizations, or as Hume calls them, "general rules" or "maxims," are essentially *guiding principles* influencing our judgment after the model maxims found in the writings of moralists and historians of the period. Hence, there is no a priori distinction between Newton's laws, popular sayings like "[a]n *Irishman* cannot have wit" (T 1.3.13.7), or commonsense maxims. All of these are "general rules" insofar as they are derived from past experience and not from reason (understood in the sense of an autonomous faculty working independently from experience). The force of general rules in bending

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our judgment is so great, according to Hume, that they can influence it "even contrary to present observation and experience" (T 1.3.13.8). That influence can be beneficial, as when, for example, knowledge of the laws of reflection helps us correct initial inaccurate optical perceptions; but it can also be detrimental as some people will continue to think that no Irish person can have wit or that Jews are misers, even after frequent experience contradicting these maxims.

But then the question arises: how is it that we can distinguish between laws and popular generalizations? Hume suggests that the difference is not in the form or the expression of the rule, since maxims can always be translated into a statement of the form, "it is always the case that when p, then q." Nor is the difference to be sought in the reference to past experience, since even prejudice is founded to some extent on past experience. How can we determine which rules are reliably formed if the only available means of deciding is a reference to past experience? Hume's answer is that we can decide which general rules are reliably formed by appealing to further general rules, namely, those stating the conditions of reliably formed causal beliefs. In *Treatise* 1.3.13.11, Hume does just that, referring us to the eight rules "by which to judge of causes and effects" that he presents in T 1.3.15.

In the first *Enquiry* Hume also suggests "laws" or reliable maxims are distinguished from common-sense maxims in that the former, unlike the latter, result from reflective reasoning: "the former cannot be established without some process of thought, and some reflection on what we have observed, in order to distinguish its circumstances, and trace its consequences: Whereas in the latter, the experienced event is exactly and fully similar to that which we infer as the result of any particular situation" (EHU 5.5 n. 8). The distinction points to the difference between a limited and an extended experience, where by extended experience I include the experience that is reliably received from others as knowledge. Extended experience, which may include the learning of scientific laws, helps us in correcting the erroneous generalizations we unconsciously accept in common life:

There is no man so young and unexperienced, as not to have formed, from observation, many general and just maxims concerning human affairs and the conduct of life; but it must be confessed, that, when a man comes to put these in practice, he will be extremely liable to error, till time and farther experience both enlarge these maxims, and teach him their proper use and application (EHU 5.5. n. 8).

The practical problem of explanation is to choose, among the many available rules that help us to clearly perceive a state of affairs, the ones that give us a correct perception. As Hume says,

No questions in philosophy are more difficult, than when a number of causes present themselves for the same phænomenon, to determine which is the principal and predominant. There seldom is any very precise argument to fix our choice, and men must be contented to be guided by a kind of taste or fancy, arising from analogy, and a comparison of similar instances (T 3.2.3.4 n.71).[39]

A correct perception depends on the degree of "expertise" of the perceiver, namely, whether he relies unreflectively on his immediate experience and the popular maxims available to him, or whether he has a more controlled judgment as a result of having

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[39] This quotation clearly shows how mistaken is the charge leveled against Hume by Honoré and Hart, a charge accepted implicitly by some Hume scholars. The charge consists in saying that Hume's analysis of causation is exclusively concerned with the problem of establishing the grounds on which we make empirical generalizations of the form, "all events A are regularly followed by events B." Although they think Hume's account, because of its criticism of the traditional story about causal powers "offered to the scientist a more or less adequate account of those aspects of causation with which he is concerned," there are, however "other difficulties connected with causation not touched by this analysis. They are felt by those who, like the historian and the lawyer, are not primarily concerned to discover laws or generalizations, but often apply known or accepted generalizations to particular cases; they are difficulties peculiar to singular causal statements"(Honoré and Hart, *Causation in the Law,* p. 10). Among the difficulties that Hume is supposed to have ignored is that of determining which of the multiple antecedents of a singular event is causally relevant to explain that event.

"extended" his experience, that is, as a result of having transcended the narrow circle of his immediate interests and the uncritical acceptance of common beliefs.

So conceived, empirical generalizations can also be part of a covering-law explanation of the kind described by Beauchamp and Rosenberg. Nothing I say here prevents us from supposing that Hume found reliably formed general rules performing the function of laws in the scientific prediction of an event. My point is, rather, that general rules and maxims have other functions that are ignored by the covering-law theory, specifically, the practical function of their being guiding principles. As guiding principles, the role of general rules in explanation is slightly different from that which they perform in covering-law explanations. General rules are used in explanation to attain more accurate perceptions, either by way of correcting beliefs formed by the use of unreliable maxims, or by setting the stage for more refined accounts of a state of affairs. For Hume, the real explanatory challenge comes always when we are confronted with other possible perceptions/explanations of a given situation or when the state of affairs seems to disappoint our experience. In those cases, the question is not so much, "what is the law that covers this phenomenon?" but, rather, "why is it that this event does not meet the expectations generated by the rule?" The maxims, in those cases, are merely a starting point for a more refined account of the event, an account that will include a detailed recital of the contextual circumstances specifying the singularity of this event with respect to the type describe in the rule. As I will argue below, Humean general rules can only be used in covering-law explanations when the event in the explanandum, does not significantly deviate from the type described in the rule or, to put it otherwise, when there is nothing specifically singular about the event to be explained.

The first confirmation of this description of Humean explanations comes from his *History of England*. For the sake of the argument I am developing here, I will focus my attention on the way historical explanations are, in the *History*, combined with regular narrative. A historical narrative proceeds by easy transitions of ideas. The

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reader must be able to follow the narrative without too much effort if the whole is to be, as Hume recommends, interesting. One must see how one event follows from another, how an action seems the natural outcome for a determinate moral character in a determinate circumstance, and all this without being asked to either verify each claim that is made by the historian, or to be fully aware of all the erudition required to assess historical facts. The historian has to gain the confidence of his readers; otherwise his authority will be undermined and his claims will not gain belief in his readers. That is why Hume thinks that the flow of the historical narrative must at times be interrupted by the intermission of explanations and economic and social surveys, and that these interruptions are necessary to the general intelligibility of the history. In the Appendix to the reign of James I, Hume says that "[I]t may not be improper, at this period, to make a pause: and to take a survey of the state of the kingdom, with regard to government, manners, finances, arms, trade, learning. Where a just notion is not formed of these particulars, history can be little instructive, and often will not be intelligible (HE 5:124)."

However, the incursions of explanation and other philosophical genres into the historical narrative can only facilitate or ease the thought transitions in the narrative. Hence Hume often complains about histories that lose their readers in the meanders of erudition or confuse them with excessive digressions. Hume reported to William Robertson, for instance, the comments of Gilbert Elliot on Robertson's *History*. Hume writes him that though Elliot finds Robertson's work "one of the finest performances he ever read … [h]e remarked, however, (which is also my opinion) that in the beginning, before your pen was sufficiently accustomed to the historic style, you employ too many digressions and reflections. This was also somewhat my own case, which I have corrected in my new edition" (HL 1:294). And in another letter to Robertson Hume attempts to dissuade him from writing a history of the "Age of Charles the fifth" because, he thinks, the "subject is disjointed; and your hero, who is the sole connection, is not very interesting. A competent knowledge at least is required of the state and constitution of the Empire; of the several kingdoms of Spain,

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of Italy, of the Low Countries; which it would be the work of half life to acquire; and, tho some parts of the story may be entertaining, there would be many dry and barren; and the whole seems not to have any great charms (HL 1:315)."

General surveys of the kind Hume appends to the reign of James I have the role of specifying a social, political, cultural, and economical context that, during the regular narrative of events, will help the reader to understand, to make a personal inference to, some otherwise surprising fact or turn of events.[40] This contextual information is also used in explanations that are interpolated in the narrative. Explanations use this contextual information to show, when needed, that although some facts seem incomprehensible from a point of view contemporary to that of Hume, they are easy to grasp once the difference between the context of the action and the context of the reader have been stressed.

Instead of looking for law-like regularities that would cover the events narrated, explanations in the *History* attempt to give an answer to questions of why an event or set of events seems to run counter to known regularities and, therefore, fail to meet our expectations. One such problem is presented in the volume of the history of the Stuarts: given that the reigns of James I and Charles I are dominated by conflicts between the respective prerogatives of the parliament and the King, and given that these prerogatives were in place for centuries, how is it that there were no such conflicts before, and why did the conflicts of prerogatives begin in their reign?

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[40] There are four appendices in the *History*. Two can be found in the first volume, the first dealing with the Anglo-Saxon "government and manners"(HE 1:160-185), and "The feudal and anglo-norman government and manners" (HE 1: 455-488). The third appendix is in volume four and presents a general survey of the government, manners, commerce, military force, revenues and learning during the reign of Elizabeth (HE 4:354-386). The fourth appendix is found in volume five and provides a similar survey of the reign of James I (HE 5:124-155).

The first question is why during "almost three centuries before the accession of James" the arbitrary power of the monarchy was never called into question even if the parliament could have done so by appealing to established rights and prerogatives. Hume's answer is that:

1) During this period parliaments met only occasionally and for brief intervals in such a way that people would hardly have an experience of their power: "when men's eyes were turned upwards in search of sovereign power, the prince alone was apt to strike them as the only permanent magistrate, invested with the whole majesty and authority of the state" (HE 5:127).

2) Members of the parliaments had only vague or no knowledge at all of past instances of conflict between parliaments and the Crown, since these examples could only be "drawn from a remote age" (HE 5:127).

3) Those who could recall past instances of parliaments' claims against the Crown knew that these were associated with "such circumstances of violence, convulsion, civil war, and disorder, that they presented by a disagreeable idea to the inquisitive part of the people, and afforded small inducement to renew such dismal scenes" (HE 5: 127).

In sum, Hume maintains that past experience could only enforce the idea of the absolute authority of the monarch, since the idea of the parliament's power was so faint, past experience of challenges to absolutism was scarce and remote, and these challenges were associated with disagreeable circumstances. The idea of the parliament's power could not trump that of absolute monarchy and, for that reason, "the principles in general which prevailed during that age, were so favourable to monarchy, that they bestowed on it an authority almost absolute and unlimited, sacred and indefeasible" (HE 5:127).

The next problem is to explain why these "general principles" were not as strong during the period of the Stuarts, and how the idea of the authority of parliament progressively acquired force during this period. To that question Hume's gives a

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general answer that will be amplified with further details and specifications during the narrative of the reign of Charles I. The new elements that altered the previous situation were:

1) The Crown's lack of economic resources and a large debt made the prince more dependent on levies and taxes, which in turn raised popular discontent.

2) Unlike other absolute monarchs, James, seriously short of money to maintain a "splendid court," sent the gentry to the countryside. This measure, intended to undermine their authority, had the contrary effect of making them focus on their properties and the "riches amassed during their residence at home, rendered them independent" (HE 5: 134).[41]

3) The spirit of liberty was fuelled by religious zeal.

These general elements defining a new context are used in Hume's narrative to explain why some events happened in apparent conflict to past experience and custom -- the outcome, for example, of the first skirmish between the young Charles and parliament. At his first summoning of parliament in 1625, Charles requested a "supply" (financing). Educated in the belief in the absolute authority of the monarch, and convinced of the affection of the Commons, he did not ask for a specific sum. He simply supposed the commons, being aware of the need of the Crown to pay large debts and for a military campaign, would grant him a supply matching these needs.

Parliament conferred on Charles a total supply amounting to 112,000 pounds, which, according to Hume, was derisory and contrary to any sound expectation. This

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[41] Hume says that this "policy is contrary to that, which has ever been practiced by all princes, who studied the encrease of their authority. To allure the nobility to court; to engage them in expensive pleasures or employments, which dissipate their fortune; to encrease their subjection to ministers by attendance; to weaken their authority in the provinces by absence: These have been the common arts of arbitrary government (HE 5:134)."

unexpected result calls for explanation: "This measure, which discovers rather a cruel mockery of Charles, than any serious design of supporting him, appears so extraordinary, when considered in all its circumstances, that it naturally summons up our attention, and raises an enquiry concerning the causes of a conduct, unprecedented in an English parliament" (HE 5: 158).

Hume again offers a detailed analysis of the circumstances leading to an unexpected decision. Among these he cites ill-will against Buckingham, who was seen to be the main influence on the king; a custom of parliamentary reluctance to open their purses to their sovereign; the growing hostility of Puritan zealots to the Court as a result of what they perceived to be Charles' favourable inclination towards French Catholics; and the belief, expressed by a growing number of commoners, that civil liberty could only be fostered by limiting the authority of the king (HE 5:158-60).

Now, we could expect the king to understand these special circumstances and manoeuvre in order to preserve, on the whole, his authority, while also making concessions to the "spirit of liberty" that began to dominate the passions of his subjects. However, Hume contends that Charles had a different *perception* of the whole situation, a perception that explains many of his ill-suited reactions to parliament and that would prove fatal to him in the end, despite all the concessions he finally made to the demands of parliament. Charles initially "could not conjecture the cause of so sudden an alteration of [the] opinions" of the parliament, and thus could only naturally infer cruelty and deceitfulness in the refusal of sufficient supply (HE 5:161). However, when he realized that the decision regarding supply was motivated by a desire to encroach on his absolute authority, he corrected his initial perception, and "failed not to regard these aims as highly criminal and traitorous" (HE 5:161). Hume explains Charles second inference by claiming that the ideas of absolutism "were firmly riveted in Charles; and however moderate his temper, the natural and unavoidable prepossessions of self-love, joined to the late uniform precedents in

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favour of prerogative, had made him regard his political tenets as certain and uncontroverted" (HE 5:161).

In Hume's own perception of the situation, the conflict of perceptions between the king and the parliament animates the growing antagonism that ended in the civil war and the execution of Charles. The same conflict is also used to explain yet another break in known regularities: that good monarchs always have happy reigns. Hume extols Charles's moral character, which is depicted as a paragon of private and public virtue. Privately he was a "kind husband, an indulgent father, a gentle master, a stedfast friend" (HE 5:220). In public life, he also was endowed with outstanding qualities: address of manner, moderation and equity, good sense, an excellent aesthetic taste and an impressive learning. "In any other age," Hume argues, "this monarch had been secure of a prosperous and happy reign" (HE 5:221). The reader would also be at pains to make the inference from Charles's moral character to the civil wars and his final execution were it not for the fact that he has been informed, as Hume recalls, that Charles stubbornly retained an idea of his own absolute authority, that there was a spirit of liberty which had "*begun* to prevail", and that a widely diffused "spirit of enthusiasm" (i.e. religious fanaticism) "disappointed all the views of human prudence, and *disturbed the operation of every motive, which usually influences society*" (HE 5:221, emphasis mine).

In the *History,* explanations occur only when the regular flow of ideas constituting the narration is interrupted by unexpected transitions, transitions of the kind we have examined above. In all these cases, the mind can no longer proceed reflexively; it needs an explicit reflection to bridge the narrative gap. These explicit reflections usually proceed by specifying a context that is in some sense exceptional with respect to the usual expectations. Having a more detailed perception of the situation helps the mind to see as natural transitions that initially seemed to contradict experience.

It may be argued that my account of Hume's explanations in the *History* reinforces, rather than undermines, the view idea that he had different explanatory approaches in the natural and the moral sciences. For if the strategy I have described so far bears some resemblance to a contextualist approach to explanation (of the kind Honoré and Hart thought was anti-Humean), it has to be acknowledged that this model seems to be of little use in making predictions. Otherwise put, the strategy I have described serves well the purpose of explaining single events, but seems to be ill-suited for explaining types of events and, thus, for predicting singular events. The apparent asymmetry between explanation and prediction in this model can be illustrated by saying that in historical explanations, wherein we infer backwards (i.e. when we explain a past fact) the explanation is likely to be attended with the highest level of probability: proof or moral certainty. On the contrary, predictive moves in history can only yield weak probability. This distinction, though, is not in the form of the explanation, but only in the content of what is explained. It is natural to expect with full certainty that the sun will rise tomorrow; it is not so to expect that decadence will necessarily follow the golden age of any future empire. The fact that historical inferences cannot be expressed or translated in the form of nomological-deductive arguments is merely the result of constraints imposed by the ideas involved in the inferences. The idea of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is so bounded by the ideas of the historical circumstances that attended that process that, although we can easily run the inference backwards, we cannot project it into a future in which the ideas of the historical circumstances are very different. Prediction is possible when constant conjunctions involve simpler sets of ideas. The possibility of expressing a material inference in the form of a covering-law explanatory model depends on the simplicity of the cluster of ideas involved in the inference. Historical or moral explanations involve very complex clusters of ideas that give weaker probabilities to any predictive move. In other words, predictive explanations of the kind that are necessary in the natural sciences have the same structure as historical or moral explanations, except that in the former it is easier to apply *ceteris paribus* clauses, i.e. to conceive future contexts as generally similar to past and present ones.

Explanations in the natural sciences are simpler versions of the model developed for history and morals. In this sense my account of Hume on explanations here is richer than the standard one that seeks in Hume a model for nomological explanations. For I first account for explanations in the more complex context of morals and history, a context wherein empirical generalizations have to be refined in order to capture the complex singularity of facts, and then show that the same model applies to explanations in natural philosophy, or in, generally, those areas wherein it is easier to abstract from complex contexts. Another advantage of my reading is that it supposes a unity and coherence in Hume's conception of explanation and in his explanatory practice as a philosopher and historian, whereas the defenders of the covering-law model have to suppose that historical explanations of the kind we find in the *History*, not being nomological in form, were, at best, second-best explanations.

The same model I have outlined is also used, I submit, in the *Treatise* to explain human nature. Although Hume constantly produces empirical generalizations about human nature -- what he calls "general rules", "maxims" or "principles" -- the general structure of the *Treatise* shows a regular passage from generalizations about human nature to more refined accounts in which these "laws" are specified or substantially qualified. Principles like that "*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent* (T 1.1.1.7)" are qualified by intractable cases like our ability to gain the idea representing a vacant place in a color spectrum, a missing shade of blue, even though we had never seen that shade before (T 1.1.1.10). Again, the same principle precludes our obtaining directly an idea of necessary connection in causation because that connection cannot be experienced, but a complicated, not to say convoluted, account of how such an idea is nevertheless produced explains how is it that we do in fact have an idea of necessary connection (T 1.3.14). Specifications, or as Hume sometimes calls them "limitations to this system," are even more frequent in his account of the passions and morals.

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It is in this constant need of specification and qualification that the sagacity of the philosopher is put to work, for it is in the interplay between generalization and particularization that concrete explanations are produced. This is what Hume has in mind when, after laying down the eight "rules by which to judge of causes and effects," he comments:

> All the rules of this nature are very easy in their invention, but extremely difficult in their application; and even experimental philosophy, which seems the most natural and simple of any, requires the utmost stretch of human judgment. There is no phæomenon in nature, but what is compounded and modify'd by so many different circumstances, that in order to arrive at the decisive point, we must carefully separate whatever is superfluous, and enquire by new experiments, if every particular circumstance of the first experiment was essential to it. These new experiments are liable to a discussion of the same kind; so that the utmost constancy is requir'd to make us persevere in our enquiry, and the utmost sagacity to choose the right way among so many that present themselves. If this be the case even in natural philosophy, how much more in moral, where there is a much greater complication of circumstances, and where those views and sentiments, which are essential to any action of the mind, are so implicit and obscure, that they often escape our strictest attention, and are not only unaccountable in their causes, but even unknown in their existence? I am much afraid, lest the small success I meet with in my enquiries will make this observation bear the air of an apology rather than of boasting (T 1.3.15.11).

3.5 The role of sympathy in explanation

The principle of sympathy plays an important role in historical and moral explanations. It is not, however, because a different model of knowledge is at work in

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history, a model in which a hermeneutic of human actions takes the place that causal analysis has in the natural sciences. I do not deny that many of the features of Hume's conception of sympathy may be found in some versions of contemporary hermeneutics. I only suggest that by associating Hume's *sympathy* with contemporary notions such as *Einfühlung* or *Verstehen,* we run the risk of smuggling the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* into Hume's unified science of human nature.

The twentieth-century understanding of the distinction between the natural and human sciences is a reaction to the project of reducing all the sciences to the nomological model, to the method of causal explanation used in the natural sciences. In the view of philosophers such as Dilthey, cold causal analysis fails to capture essential aspects of human experience, aspects that become expressible once we assume that we have a special insight into what other people feel or experience, an insight significantly different from that used when we attempt to understand non-human objects. But as I have suggested above, although Hume constantly offers empirical generalisations of a law-like sort, he does not see explanations exclusively as a means of saving the phenomena by way of covering laws. On the contrary, Hume sees causal analysis as a matter of *sagacity*, as the ability to account for exceptions to the rules or for such subtle and minute mechanisms as the passions are. For this reason causal analysis need not be, for Hume, a threat to the uniqueness of human actions and social processes.

Sympathy plays a central role in historical and moral knowledge because the *sagacity* that is so central to the explanatory model I have described is insufficient for producing explanations in morals and history. Sagacity must be complemented by an *enlightened sensibility*. Or, to put it differently, to be sagacious in accounting for events involving human actions, one must also be able to perceive the moral salience of human events from an impartial point of view. Sensibility needs, thus, to be

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enlightened if one wants to produce unbiased explanations that preserve the necessary impartiality.

3.5.1 The principle of sympathy

Let us first consider how the mechanism of sympathy works. For Hume, sympathy is one of the most surprising and singular qualities of human nature. It consists in an aptitude "to receive by communication ... inclinations and sentiments [of others], however different from, or even contrary to our own" (T 2.1.11.2). It is through sympathy that I can feel pity for someone I do not know or attune my sentiments to those of the people who are in my company. It is also by sympathy, Hume contends, that people of the same country come to share a similar turn of mind that defines, as it were, their national character.

As an operation of the mind, sympathy consists in the conversion of an idea into an impression. This operation is complex. We begin by observing the "external signs" by which another person's emotions are manifest. Thus in conversation with a friend, the tone of her voice, her body language, as well as the content of what she tells us, make it possible for us to form an *idea* of her emotional state. "This idea," Hume says, "is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection" (T 2.1.11.3). We can, from external signs, "read" someone's emotions, and then the ideas we form are so enlivened that they acquire a vivacity like that of the original emotions. This conversion of an idea into an impression is facilitated by the fact that the object of sympathy is related to the "idea, or rather impression of ourselves (T 2.1.11.3)."[42] The relations of resemblance and contiguity

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[42]A recurrent problem in Hume scholarship is the seeming inconsistency between the claim of the second book of the *Treatise*, *viz.*, that "'Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us" (T 2.1.11.4), and

increase this relation to the self. So, for example, I am more likely to sympathize with persons of my acquaintance, family, friends, and colleagues, because I am concerned with their fate. This concern reflects not only my worries about their destiny, but also the fact that I am involved in their lives, that what happens to them will in a manner affect me. I may also feel sympathy with the emotions of persons I do not know but who are in one way or another connected to me. Such sympathy with other persons is made possible by "the general resemblance of our natures," but, significantly, when there is "similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates the sympathy" (T 2.1.11.5). Contiguity too plays a role in facilitating the conversion of an idea into an impression: the closer we are to the persons of whose sentiments we form an idea, the more likely it is that sympathetic communication will take place. The emotions of someone wounded in my presence, for example, are much more likely to affect me than the suffering of persons of whose hardships I am informed only by a newspaper.

Hume's well-known skeptical analysis of personal identity in book one. There he criticizes "philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF", and goes on to claim that the self is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions" (T 1.4.6.1, 4). I will not address this issue here beyond noting that Hume suggests that there is a distinction to be made in our consideration of the problem of personal identity "as it regards our thought and imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in our selves" (T 1.4.6.5). The skeptical argument of Treatise 1.4.6 addresses the first issue, not the second. So however Hume may have construed the relationship between the skeptical treatment of personal identity in metaphysics and the non-skeptical one in the psychology of passions, he does not think he is introducing inconsistency when he refers to the idea or impression of the self in his treatment of sympathy and the passions. This being said, the problem remains how to connect a metaphysical skepticism about the self with a necessary assumption of a self in moral psychology. For recent discussions of Hume on personal identity see Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 163-86. See also Jane L. McIntyre, "Personal Identity and the Passions," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989): pp. 316-41, Terence Penelhum, *Themes in Hume : The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The most curious feature of sympathy, however, is not this capacity to attune our sentiments to those of our entourage, for, according to Hume, this aptitude is also present in animals (T 2.2.12.6-7). The striking feature of Hume's theory is that he believes we have an ability to sympathize not only with the emotions of others but also with their opinions.[43] That sympathy makes us embrace the opinion of others is something that is, according to Hume, noticeable not only in children, but also in adults "who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions" (T 2.1.11.2). Hume reinforces this view in book three:

> So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree. And tho', on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiments, and way of thinking; yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought, and give an authority to that opinion, which is recommended to me by his assent and approbation (T 3.3.2.2).

It is not entirely clear how the mechanism of sympathy functions when applied to opinions. It is one thing to convert an idea of an emotion, a non-propositional idea, into an impression, but quite another to convert the idea of a belief, a propositional idea, into an impression. Given that Hume holds 1) that there are complex impressions, and 2) that no other distinction exists between ideas and impressions except vivacity (T 1.1.1.2-3), it may be that he supposes a whole belief can be converted into an impression.[44] But I am not entirely convinced by this interpretation. There is, I suggest a more plausible way of reading what Hume has said on sympathy

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[43] Cf. James Farr, "Hume, Hermeneutics, and History," p. 291; Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*, p. 43.

[44] Herdt, for example, interprets Hume as making the claim that beliefs can be the objects of sympathy. Herdt argues that it is the vivacity of the belief that is increased by the operation of sympathy. See *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*, p. 43.

with opinions. Note that he says: "no object is presented to the senses, nor image form'd in the fancy, but what is accompany'd with some emotion or movement of spirits proportion'd to it" (T 2.2.8.4). Later he says "that almost every kind of idea is attended with some emotion, even the ideas of number and extension, much more those of such objects as are esteem'd of consequence in life, and fix our attention" (T 2.2.10.9). It appears, then, that when a person's belief is communicated to us, we form at the same time an idea of the emotion accompanying this belief. It follows that sympathy with opinions will consist in converting the idea of the accompanying emotion into an impression, thus causing us to share with our interlocutor the emotion that accompanies her related belief. Thus if someone defends a belief with ardor and conviction, and if that person is related to us by those links that trigger sympathy, we will feel the same ardor and conviction and, for that reason, we will find it difficult to distance ourselves from the opinion the person has expressed or endorsed.

3.5.2 Degrees of sympathy

Another important feature of sympathy is that it admits of different degrees. Hume sometimes refers to a distinction between "weak" and "strong" sympathy, and also to another between "limited" and "extensive" sympathy (T 2.2.9.12-15; 3.3.1.11; 3.3.1.23; 3.3.6.3). This point has been recently given a thorough consideration by Herdt. She insists that Hume considers sympathy at different levels: from an unconscious appropriation of the emotions of others to the "sympathetic understanding" that involves a judicious entering into the minds of others. The analysis of sympathy proposed by Herdt is important because it makes it possible to save Hume from the obvious charge that the principle of sympathy would make us endorse any belief held by people close to us. If sympathy was only an irresistible operation by which we come to share the beliefs and sentiments of those who are appropriately related to us, there would be no way of correcting the tendency to uphold national or irrational prejudices, and preference would always be given to friends and family over any other norms. It would, thus be "natural" to detest people

from other parties, religious creeds, or nations. It would also be "natural" to give a job to a friend, rather than to another, more competent candidate. Against that reading of sympathy, Herdt argues that Hume's sympathy allows for a mechanism of correction that enables us to adopt a more impartial point of view and that, at the level of "sympathetic understanding," our ability to enter into other people's minds makes it possible to adopt points of view that are even contrary to our inclinations.

The different degrees of sympathy, in terms roughly similar to those suggested by Herdt, are these:

Unconscious sympathy is that which takes place without our noticing it. It results from an unconscious imitation or adaptation to other's feelings, as for example, at a party where we may either partake of a general enthusiasm and euphoria, or feel a general tediousness, without knowing exactly how or why. Unconscious sympathy is also responsible for our adopting the manners or ways of the people with whom we live. At this level, sympathy operates as a form of unnoticed "contagion" of the kind that explains the diffusion of a certain turn of mind, manners and character among people living in the same nation (T 2.1.11.2 and E-NC 202).[45] It is also by unconscious sympathy that a "good-natur'd man finds himself in an instant of the same humour with his company" (T 2.1.11.2). This form of contagious sympathy is, equally, the one we share with other animals: "Fear, anger, courage and other affections are frequently

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[45] It is in the essay "Of National Characters" (1748) that Hume uses the metaphor of contagion. Although the essay obviously expands on the idea expressed in T 2.1.11.2, Hume does not explicitly mention the term "sympathy": "The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions" (E-NC 202).

communicated from one animal to another, *without their knowledge* of that cause, which produc'd the original passion" (T 2.2.12.6, italics added).

There are other situations, however, in which we can tell that we are moved by another person's sentiments, manners or present state. In all these cases a *conscious sympathy* is at work. But in these cases a distinction has to be made between limited and extensive sympathy. *Limited sympathy* is a conscious feeling of the emotions of another person triggered by an immediate impression he or she makes on us. *Extensive sympathy* arises when limited sympathy excites the imagination and not only makes us conscious of the present emotions of another person, but also of his or her desires and expectations, as well as of the future consequences of what is happening to us at the present time.

> 'Tis certain, that sympathy is not always limited to the present moment, but that we often feel by communication the pains and pleasures of others, which are not in being, and which we only anticipate by the force of imagination. (T 2.2.9.13)

Take for example two persons having a violent argument in the street. It is likely that we will feel troubled by the violence we observe and may even hurry to leave a scene that is causing us such unpleasant emotions. But if the persons involved are known or related to us, the same emotions may cause us to stay and intervene. The distinction between limited and extensive sympathy serves to explain the two different responses to these similar situations. For in the first case, sympathy – that is, our feeling of the emotions of others – extends no further than the present and, thus, excites no emotions other than the ones aroused, anger or hatred, for example, by the scene. On the contrary, when we know the persons involved in the argument, sympathy, aided by imagination, helps us enter more deeply into their feelings by conjectures about the causes and possible consequences of the present situation. It helps us to foresee the feelings of guilt or shame the participants may later experience should the argument turn into an actual fight. In addition, each of these considerations will produce concern about our friends and a desire to prevent future harm to them. Extensive sympathy

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derives, in short, from a more complex and layered perception of the scene, a perception that includes reasons and inferences about the past and future.

Extensive sympathy also comes in degrees, for it is dependent on the quantity of the original or limited sympathy. Hence, when a present scene elicits but a weak sympathy, our capacity to extend the sympathy is diminished in proportion. A strong sympathy, on the other hand is more likely to extend itself to the consequences of the present situation:

> When the present misery of another has any strong influence upon me, the vivacity of the conception is not confin'd merely to its immediate object, but diffuses its influence over all the related ideas, and gives me a lively notion of all the circumstances of that person, whether past, present, or future; possible, probable or certain. By means of this lively notion I am interested in them; take part with them; and feel a sympathetic motion in my breast, conformable to whatever I imagine in his. If I diminish the vivacity of the first conception, I diminish that of the related ideas; as pipes can convey no more water than what arises at the fountain. By this diminution I destroy the future prospect, which is necessary to interest me perfectly in the fortune of another. (T 2.2.9.14)

That sympathy may be extended is crucial for understanding how is it that the present suffering of a person excites in us a concern for his well being, rather than a desire to suppress our feeling of his suffering or, even, a joy or malice that results from comparing our better situation with the unhappy state of the person. That extensive sympathy makes this concern for the well being of others possible is, in turn, extremely important for understanding the role Hume gives to sympathy in morals.

There is a further form, *partial sympathy*, that is of interest here. Partial sympathy occurs when our sympathy is elicited not directly, but indirectly, by a real emotion in another person. This happens when we form by way of a *general rule* an idea of the emotion that should attend a person in a given state, even though the person in question does not experience that emotion. As an example, Hume mentions the case of a "person of merit" who, falling in great misfortune, endures all his hardships with a

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"greatness of mind" that shuts out sorrow or distress (T 2.2.7.5). In such a case, Hume maintains, we nevertheless "form a notion of his condition; and carrying our fancy from the cause to the usual effect, first conceive a lively idea of his sorrow, and then feel an impression of it" (T 2.2.7.5). The idea we form comes not from the actual sorrow of the person, for he feels no sorrow, but is formed thanks to our experience that "such a degree of passion is usually connected with such a misfortune; and tho' there be an exception in the present case, yet the imagination is affected by the *general rule*, and makes us conceive a lively idea of the passion, or rather feel the passion itself, in the same manner, as if the person were really actuated by it" (T 2.2.7.5).

These two features of sympathy, *viz.* that it can be extended and that it can result from general rules, are central to understanding its moral function. Extensive sympathy is responsible for our developing a concern for others, a concern that grounds our natural sociability. Extensive sympathy is, thus, the cornerstone of Hume's response to those theories of morals, those of Hobbes or Mandeville, for example, founded on self-love. Our use of general rules in sympathy also explains how is it possible that our concern for others can extend further than our immediate circle to include even those that are opposed to our interests. In other words, extensive sympathy and general rules make possible a mechanism for correcting our initial, limited sympathy, a mechanism that also permits us to acquire, without totally departing from our perspectival experience and sentiments, a general point of view on moral issues. The system of corrective sympathy secures both the possibility of having stable and impartial moral judgments, and the maintaining of a human, that is, a practical and sensible, perspective in judging moral facts.

Hume suggests that in our judging of the character of others we cannot ask what is impossible, namely, that people be effectively serviceable to humanity in general. We must be content to judge whether they are serviceable, good, or benevolent within the sphere in which they live: "When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be

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serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him" (T 3.3.3.2). Hume adds that, because there are many different interests within a society, each representing a different point of view, it is necessary to put aside our own interest when making moral judgments: "The only point of view, in which our sentiments concur with those of others, is, when we consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it" (T 3.3.3.2).

Hume contends that however distant from ourselves (in all the possible meanings that "distance" can here have: of opinion, nationality, space and time, etc.) the actions of some person may be, we can nevertheless form, with the aid of general rules, an idea of the passions of that person. By experience we have come to approve actions that reflect a concern for the well being of the people in our circle. That experience permits us to consider cases that, though they are distant with respect to us, fall nevertheless under the rules we have derived from experience. We come thus to sympathize with actions reflecting a generic interest for the well being of others even though they are distant from our immediate concerns. Hume illustrates, by an analogy with the corrective mechanism in sense perception, how he understands the corrective mechanisms of sympathy to work:

> The case is here the same as in our judgments concerning external bodies. All objects seem to diminish by their distance: But tho' the appearance of objects to our senses be the original standard, by which we judge of them, yet we do not say, that they actually diminish by the distance; but correcting the appearance by reflection, arrive at a more constant and establish'd judgment concerning them. In like manner, tho' sympathy be much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and a sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; yet we neglect all these differences in our calm judgments concerning the characters of men. Besides, that we ourselves often change our situation in this particular, we every day meet with persons, who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who cou'd never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation and point of view, which is peculiar

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to us. The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. And tho' the *heart* does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools. (T 3.3.3.2)

Hume's general standards are thus part of the mechanism of sympathy considered as a complex sense allowing for immediate (limited sympathy), as well as for more complicated perceptions (extensive sympathy), and also for mechanisms of correction that make the constitution of a stable "moral field" possible. The analogy between moral perception and sense perception is, of course, not a casual one and already puts us in the midst of Hume's interpretation of the moral sense theory.

3.5.3 Sympathy and the moral sense

It is also helpful to look at Hume's account of sympathy in the light of the modifications that he made to Francis Hutcheson's theory of the moral sense. In his *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, published in 1725, Hutcheson contended that, besides our external senses, we also possess an internal sense that allows us to *perceive* moral properties.[46] In other words, Hutcheson suggests that moral judgments, rather than being the product of a rational deliberation are (as is also the case with aesthetic judgments), the result of an immediate act of perception. Just as we can intuitively perceive the beauty of something, so we can also perceive the vice or the virtue of an action. Hutcheson's theory propounds a cognitive

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[46]Francis Hutcheson, *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue : in two treatises. I. Concerning beauty, order, harmony, design. II. Concerning moral good and evil*, 4th ed. (London: Printed for D. Midwinter , et al., 1738), p.73.

interpretation of the moral sense that upholds the form of moral realism that he is supporting against skeptics like Hobbes or Mandeville.[47]

Moral sense theory explains moral distinctions as the result of distinctive, primitive feelings of approbation or disapprobation that arise in the presence of moral objects, of motivations and actions, that is. Important tasks for a moral sense theorist are then:

1) To determine the features in moral objects that are susceptible of eliciting moral reactions. Such an account would determine what exactly turns motivations and actions into the objects of moral perception, and explain in what sense the moral salience of actions and motivations constitute objective features of the world.

2) To explain what is distinctive about the sentiments elicited in moral perception. Had we not the ability to discriminate moral sentiments from other sentiments, a reference to feelings would be insufficient to explain the difference between moral distinctions and the manifestation of personal preferences. Unless we can indicate what is distinctive about the moral sentiments we would lose, in moral sense theory, the necessary distinction between "is morally good" and "looks morally good to me."

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[47]For a discussion of Hutcheson's moral realism and its influence in Hume see the chapter "Hutcheson's Moral Realism" in David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*. For an account of the relationship between Hume and Hutcheson also emphasizing the differences between them, see James Moore "Hume and Hutcheson" in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart & John P. Wright, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, pp. 23-57. For criticisms of Norton's cognitive interpretation of the moral sense theory in Hutcheson and Hume see P.J.E. Kail, "Hutcheson's Moral Sense: Skepticism, Realism, and Secondary Qualities," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2001); Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Hutcheson's Perceptual and Moral Subjectivism," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (1986); Kenneth P. Winkler, "Hutcheson and Hume on the Color of Virtue," *Hume Studies* 22 (1996), and "Hutcheson's Alleged Realism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985). See also Norton, "Hutcheson's Moral Realism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985).

3) To explain how it is that the correlation between certain moral objects and moral feelings is a stable one. Without that account, moral sense theory cannot explain the objectivity and stability of our moral responses.

Hutcheson and Hume have a similar view with respect to the first issue. Both believe that moral approbation is directed to benevolent actions or characters and moral disapprobation goes to vicious or malevolent actions or characters. This moral disposition shows, in turn, that our moral preferences are oriented toward, ultimately, motives that reflect a concern for the well being of others.[48]

Regarding the second challenge to moral sense theory, Hutcheson and Hume both think that the pleasure or pain that is caused by the presence of moral objects is distinguishable from the pleasure or pain aroused by other objects. Hutcheson claims, for instance, that we have a capacity to distinguish between *natural* and *moral good or evil*, that is, a capacity to experience different kinds of pleasure in response to these different kinds of objects. In addition, we are able to experience moral pleasure in response to actions that are not immediately agreeable to us and to experience natural pleasure for actions or characters that we disapprove morally. It is possible to admire

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[48] Hutcheson says, for example, that "as soon as any Action is represented to us as flowing from Love, Humanity, Gratitude, Compassion, a Study of the Good of others, and an ultimate Desire of their Happiness, altho' it were in the most distant Part of the World, or in some past Age, we feel Joy within us, admire the lovely Action, and praise its Author. And on the contrary, every Action represented as flowing from Ill-will, Desire of the Misery of others without View to any prevalent good to the Publick, or Ingratitude, raises Abhorrence and Aversion." Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p. 75. See also Hume T 3.2.2.24: "Thus *self-interest* is the original motive to the *establishment* of justice: But a *sympathy* with *public* interest is the source of the *moral* approbation, which attends that virtue. This latter principle of sympathy is too weak to controul our passions; but has sufficient force to influence our taste, and give us the sentiments of approbation or blame."

the virtues of an enemy and at the same time to experience the disagreements of these virtuous actions when applied against us. The fact that we can experience moral pleasure for actions or characters which bear no relation to our interests or are even directed against those interests, shows, in Hutcheson's view, that a moral sense must be presupposed.[49]

Hume holds that to "have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction *of a particular kind* from the contemplation of a character" (T 3.1.2.3; italics added). He insists that moral sentiments are feelings "of a particular kind" because he wants to pre-empt the objection that referring moral distinctions to feelings would have us approving the moral qualities of any object that pleases us, including inanimate objects. Against that objection Hume maintains we commonly recognize that pleasure and pain are of different kinds: "A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour?" Moral characters and actions excite many different sentiments, among which there is a sentiment of "that *peculiar* kind, which makes us praise or condemn." Hume argues one of the distinguishing features of moral pleasure is that it is a disinterested pleasure: "'Tis only when a character is consider'd in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil" (T 3.1.2.4). And, as we have seen above, this disinterested point of view that makes moral sentiments possible obtains exclusively through extensive sympathy. For only by means of extensive sympathy, or in sympathy generated by general rules, can we approve or disapprove of actions from which we reap no advantage or inconvenience.

It follows, then, that the interplay between limited and extensive sympathy is also crucial for the functioning of the moral sense. That interplay gives us an experience of

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[49]Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p. 75.

what is distinctive about moral sentiments. And this experience, which is responsible for our learning to discriminate moral sentiments, is at the basis of our capacity to distinguish between "what looks morally good for me" and "what is morally good." Only a mature subject, having developed an ability to extend her sympathy beyond the limited circle of her family, acquaintances, or countrymen, acquires the ability to clearly discriminate the distinctive moral pleasure and pain from other pleasures and pain, thereby becoming a competent judge in morals:

> 'Tis true, those sentiments, from interest and morals, are apt to be confounded, and naturally run into one another. It seldom happens, that we do not think an enemy vicious, and can distinguish betwixt his opposition to our interest and real villainy or baseness. But this hinders not, but that the sentiments are, in themselves, distinct; and a man of temper and judgment may preserve himself from these illusions. In like manner, tho' 'tis certain a musical voice is nothing but one that naturally gives a *particular* kind of pleasure; yet 'tis difficult for a man to be sensible, that the voice of an enemy is agreeable, or to allow it to be musical. But a person of a fine ear, who has the command of himself, can separate these feelings, and give praise to what deserves it. (T 3.1.2.4)

Sympathy is also the source of the main difference between Hutcheson's and Hume's conceptions of the moral sense. This difference relates to the third of the problems mentioned, namely, that of explaining how it is possible that virtuous actions are always correlated with a sentiment of approbation and vicious actions with a sentiment of displeasure. Hutcheson explains the correlation between the moral sentiments of the observer, and such objective features as the motives and actions of agents, by appealing to a providential order of nature. He contends that it is safe to assume that "the Deity is morally good" because "there is abundant Probability, deduc'd from the whole Frame of Nature, which seems, as far as we know, plainly contriv'd for the Good of the Whole." Accordingly, Hutcheson reasons that, "if the Deity be really benevolent, and desires the Happiness of the others, he could not rationally act otherwise, or give us a moral Sense upon another Foundation, without

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counteracting his own benevolent Intentions."[50] In other words, our moral responses are natural both in the sense that they are spontaneous and unreflective, and in the sense that they are consistent with the providential order of nature.

Hutcheson views moral sense theory as providing an account of the foundation of morals that is in tune with the kind of naturalism supported by Protestant natural law theorists such as Pufendorf or Grotius. Hume, however, makes no providentialist assumptions in his account of the foundation of moral distinctions.[51] On the contrary, he explicitly uses the principle of sympathy as a way of bypassing natural providentialism. The issue is of central importance also for understanding the exact scope of Hume's naturalism and, unsurprisingly, was revealed in the correspondence between Hutcheson and Hume, correspondence written after Hutcheson had read the as yet unpublished manuscript of book 3 of the *Treatise*. In a response to comments by Hutcheson (whose letter is not extant), Hume expresses his disagreement with Hutcheson's use of the word "natural"

> I cannot agree to your Sense of *Natural*. Tis founded on final Causes; which is a Consideration, that appears to me pretty uncertain & unphilosophical. For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or for the Next? For himself or for his Maker? Your Definition of *Natural* depends upon solving these Questions, which are endless, & quite wide of my Purpose. (HL 1:33)

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[50] Ibid. 192.

[51] Various interpreters stress Hume's non-providentialist interpretation of the moral sense and of natural law theory. See Stephen Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*, pp. 39-81; Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*, and "Hume, Human Nature, and the Foundations of Morality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

The moral sense cannot, for Hume, have a natural foundation if by "natural" a more substantive, providential view of nature is implied -- a view exceeding so much our limited cognitive capacities that it would endanger rather than aid in the task of giving a solid foundation to morals. In *Treatise* 3.1.2.7-9 Hume contends that his own story about the foundation of moral distinctions can only count as a naturalistic one once we agree on a definition of what we mean by "nature." However, he complains, there is no "more ambiguous and equivocal" term." (T 3.1.2.7). For "natural" can be opposed to "miraculous" and in this sense it is only too obvious that moral distinctions are natural. "Natural" can also be opposed to "rare" and "unusual", in which case the question of whether the distinctions between vice and virtue are natural resolves itself into the question of the regularity of our experience of the stability of these distinctions. Hume suggests that moral distinctions can also be said to be natural in this sense. Finally, "natural" can be taken as opposed to "artificial", or as we might say, "conventional." Hume argues that in this sense the question of whether moral distinctions are natural cannot be given a simple answer, for it appears that some virtues are natural and others -- justice, for example -- are artificial.

However, in none of these senses can "nature" be said to account for the correlation between moral responses and moral features of the world. This is the task Hume gives to extensive sympathy. For extensive sympathy allows us to identify characters or actions that instance either benevolence or ill-will. Furthermore, given that extensive sympathy is disinterested, the sympathetic identification of the moral salience of actions and motivations cannot be said to be subjective, if by "subjective" it is meant that moral responses would be entirely relative to our personal preferences. My identification of an action as virtuous does indeed depend on my personal perspective, in the sense that I may lack some relevant information, and thus fail to properly *perceive* the action in question. I may for instance briefly see somebody leading an old man cross the street and judge that this is a benevolent action, not realizing that this action is part of a plot, organized by the heirs of the old man, to run him over with a car and collect his estate. But this limitation does not imply that moral distinctions are

subjective, but only that they are subject to our cognitive limitations. Furthermore, the perspective is never entirely personal since our moral perception can be corrected by the testimony of others. The "normal conditions" for moral observation are not so easy to attain, since in some cases a good moral perception is dependent on collecting contextual information and receiving testimony. But on the whole a mature moral judge knows that her brief observation of someone leading an old man across the street is not sufficient to pass moral judgement if the issue turns out to be contentious, and she also knows when she can declare herself sufficiently satisfied with her perception of the action to pronounce a moral verdict. Once the "normal conditions" of perception are reached, however, moral judgement is entirely objective both in the sense that the moral objects that it grasps are impartially identified and in the sense that the moral response is independent of our personal preferences and inclinations.

It is in his correspondence with Hutcheson that Hume modified for the final version of the *Treatise* a crucial paragraph of the final section of that work (T 3.3.6.3). Whereas Hutcheson sees in Hume's cold explanation of the mechanism of the moral sense a lack of warmth in the cause of virtue, Hume sees himself as describing the functioning of the moral sense in the manner of an anatomist, not that of a painter. He sees himself as describing "its most secret Springs & Principles," rather than describing "the Grace & Beauty of its Actions" (HL 1: 32). But he believes that much is gained in proceeding like an anatomist, just as painters gain from the findings of anatomists. In the case of morals, for instance, his anatomy of the moral sense will make it possible to avoid the pitfalls of a providentialist foundation for the moral sense. Thus, in the paragraph in question he aims at Hutcheson by saying:

> Those who resolve the sense of morals into original instincts of the
> human mind, may defend the cause of virtue with sufficient authority;
> but want the advantage, which those possess, who account for that sense
> by an extensive sympathy with mankind. According to the latter system,
> not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also the sense of virtue: And
> not only that sense, but also the principles, from whence it is deriv'd. So

that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good. (T 3.3.6.3)[52]

The principle of sympathy makes it possible to give a "natural" foundation to the moral sense -- "natural" in some of the senses listed above -- without committing the theory to a more substantive account of nature. Sympathy, specifically *extensive sympathy*, accomplishes this by solving the three problems faced by the moral sense theory, namely, that of identifying moral objects; that of identifying moral sentiments; and that of assuring the objectivity and stability of moral judgments. We can say, in other words, that extensive sympathy constitutes the moral sense because it opens up a moral field to our perception. Extensive sympathy also makes possible, then, the discrimination of interested from genuinely moral sentiments. Finally, both because moral objects are identified regardless of our interests, and because the moral sentiments are also identified as distinct from our personal preferences, a stable and objective correlation between certain moral objects and certain responses is secured and the objectivity of moral judgment preserved.

According to Hume's claims in *Treatise* 3.3.6.3, extensive sympathy not only makes intuitive moral reaction possible, but it is also the ground for the general orientation of our moral preferences. Out of this identification of sympathy with the inner moral sense it follows that, for Hume, sympathy holds a twofold cognitive function. On the one hand, to the extent that it grounds the moral sense, the principle of sympathy

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[52] David Norton has pointed out to me in correspondence that Hutcheson may have changed his mind after reading the final version of the *Treatise*, for he, surprisingly, gives a role to sympathy in a text first published (in Latin) in 1742: "There are other still more noble senses and more useful: such is that sympathy or fellow-feeling, by which the state and fortunes of others affect us exceedingly, so that by the very power of nature, previous to any reasoning or meditation, we rejoice in the prosperity of others, and sorrow with them in their misfortunes; as we are disposed to mirth when we see others cheerful, and to weep with those that weep, without any consideration of our own Interests," Francis Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1747), p. 14. This translation is thought to be by Hutcheson.

works as a *receptive faculty* that permits the apprehension of moral objects. On the other hand, sympathy acquires also a *normative function* both in the sense that it directs our approbation to certain objects -- those that promote the well being of others -- and in the sense that it is also by sympathy that we find that benevolence is morally good.

3.5.4 Sympathy and history

The principle of sympathy, by enabling a perception of the moral properties of human events, makes it possible to have a complete perception of matters of fact in the moral and historical domain. If to explain is to arrive at, or to make others arrive at, a clear and refined perception of a state of affairs, then no complete perception of matters of fact in history and morals is possible without the contributions of the principle of sympathy. For, in order to causally explain the connection between a particular motivation and a given action it is first necessary to perceive the motivation or the moral character of the agent. This does not imply that there is a tension between Hume's "naturalistic program" and his account of the moral sciences, a tension between one way of explaining in the natural sciences and another quite different for the moral domain. From the point of view I have outlined, there is no methodological difference between natural and moral explanations. There is merely the fact that moral explanations require the contribution of other cognitive senses, such as the moral sense, in order the obtain the required complexity of perception that we try to clarify or refine. Thus to perceive an action exclusively as resulting from causal relations involving only events observable by sense-perception is to miss important information, and thus to have an inadequate or incomplete perception. The crucial distinction that emerges from a comparison between the natural and the moral sciences is that the latter involve more complex perceptions, not that they are in need of a substantively different explanation.

Consider, for example, how Hume conceives the contribution of sympathy to historical explanations. What makes sympathy a crucial tool in historical knowledge is its capacity to become a criterion for selecting, amongst the multitude of past events, those with moral significance. Sympathy becomes a criterion for selecting and organizing historical facts with the aim of integrating them into a meaningful historical narrative. The process of selecting data and organizing the historical narrative works thus under two kinds of constraints. From an epistemic point of view, a sagacious historian validates some testimonies and discards others. For Hume, this constrains us to exclude from historiography the history of nations that did not produce written testimonies, for oral tradition is, in his opinion, totally unreliable. This is precisely the reason that Hume uses in the first paragraph of his *History of England* for excluding from his work the pre-Roman history of the Britons.

> The curiosity entertained by all civilized nations, of enquiring into the exploits and adventures of their ancestors, commonly excites a regret that the history of remote ages should always be so much involved in obscurity, uncertainty, and contradiction. Ingenious men, possessed of leisure, are apt to push their researches beyond the period, in which literary monuments are framed or preserved; without reflecting, that the memory of past events is immediately lost or disfigured, when intrusted to memory or oral tradition, and that the adventures of barbarous nations, even if they were recorded, could afford little or no entertainment to men born in a more cultivated age (HE 1:3).

The second constraint is provided by the *application* of the principle of sympathy. The principle of selection and order of historical data that sympathy makes possible is the expression of the normative function of sympathy in its relation to the moral sense. The moral sense *perceives* only those facts with which it communicates by sympathy (this is its receptive function), and communicates by sympathy only with those facts that confirm the general orientation of the intuitive moral preferences of that sense (this is its normative function). Thus, sympathy becomes the normative framework of history, understood as "history with which a moral identification is possible." For sympathy prescribes both the form and the content of historical narratives. Sympathy

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prescribes how history is to be written if it has to fulfill its moral task, namely that of educating the moral and political sentiments of the reader by giving to him moral and political examples that will test his or her moral sentiments and judgment. A good historical narrative is one that collects important events in the history of "civilized" nations and organizes them in such a way that they provoke sympathy in the reader.

> The perusal of a history seems a calm entertainment; but would be no entertainment at all, did not our hearts beat with correspondent movements to those which are described by the historian (EMP 5.32).

or:

> The indifferent, uninteresting style of SUETONIUS, equally with the masterly pencil of TACITUS, may convince us of the cruel depravity of NERO or TIBERIUS: But what a difference of sentiment! While the former coldly relates the facts; and the latter sets before our eyes the venerable figures of a SORANUS and a THRASEA, intrepid in their fate, and only moved by the melting sorrows of their friends and kindred. What sympathy then touches every human heart! What indignation against the tyrant, whose causeless fear or unprovoked malice gave rise to such detestable barbarity! (EMP 5.34)

A bad historical narrative is one that, either because of its style or because of the insignificance of the events reported, fails to provoke any moral reflection in the reader:

> THUCYDIDES and GUICCIARDIN support with difficulty our attention; while the former describes the trivial rencounters of the small cities of GREECE, and the latter the harmless wars of PISA. The few persons interested, and the small interest fill not the imagination, and engage not the affections. The deep distress of the numerous ATHENIAN army before SYRACUSE; the danger, which so nearly threatens VENICE; these excite compassion; these move terror and anxiety (EMP 5.33).

It is now possible to reconstruct a Humean definition of history: history for Hume is the set of past events that a) are established and thus attended with belief; b) can be the object of a moral reflection; and c) are worth being conserved in social memory

given the magnitude of the passions that these events cause, i.e. given the *meaning* that they acquire for a contemporary individual.

Finally, the mechanism of sympathy permits a more refined work of historical interpretation by allowing the historian to comprehend the specific differences that are manifest in a given culture, language, or historical period. In his essay *Of National Characters,* Hume contends, against a tradition that stretches from Jean Bodin to Montesquieu, that national characters are not the product of climatic or geographic conditions but are, rather, the result of specific social and political practices communicated through sympathy as it operates in the social body.[53] Thus, the principle of sympathy makes possible an interpretation of historical facts that does not overlook the specificity of social practices and conceptual schemes that are culturally and historically situated.

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[53] For further details, see P.E. Chamley, "The Conflict between Montesquieu and Hume. A Study of the Origins of Adam Smith's Universalism," in *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. A.S. Skinner and T. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 274-309.

Chapter 4

Perception, Experience and the Science of Human Nature

4.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have suggested that Hume is better understood when we think of his philosophy as sharing with the mitigated historical pyrrhonists a legal-historical conception of empirical facts and knowledge. I have also argued that a reflection on history was central in shaping this philosophical point of view, both at the level of epistemology, concerning the status of historical knowledge, and at the metaphysical level, where an understanding of history is said to contribute to an understanding of human nature. In chapter 2, I argued that, contrary to some common readings of Hume, we can only make sense of his views on historical beliefs if we abandon two assumptions about his "empiricism": 1) that sense perception has epistemic primacy over testimony in belief-forming processes, and 2), that "experience" means for Hume "private experience." The revision of these common assumptions, in turn, reveals a convergence between Hume's approach and the historical-legal understanding of empirical knowledge.

However, these claims need further discussion to be convincing. For they seem to run counter to a common picture of Hume as the philosopher who claims that in the last analysis all our knowledge derives from and is to be referred to, sense perception and personal memory. In other words, despite the fact that Hume scholarship presents nowadays a much more nuanced view of his epistemological and metaphysical commitments, Hume's "empiricism" continues to be viewed as supporting the claim that all our conceptual capacities derive from a particular kind of psychological dispositions -- associationism -- applied to private mental items -- impressions and ideas -- that are present to the mind thanks to our perceptual apparatus. This

assumption makes it problematic to claim that Hume shared what I have called the legal-historical approach.

Three claims are characteristic of the legal-historical approach to empirical knowledge as it was described in chapter 1. The first is that a fact is not an event that is *given* to a knower but, rather, an event that is actively *established* by competent "judges of fact" according to socially established practices of validation. Second, assessing testimony is central to empirical knowledge, not only because a great many of our empirical beliefs are derived from testimony, but also because it is assumed that sense perception is nothing but another form of testimony. Third, for the legal-historical conception the problem of the objectivity of empirical knowledge is treated as the problem of how to be *just* in judging of facts, so that the problem of how it is possible to have empirical knowledge is considered in the light of moral rather than epistemic-cum-semantic norms.

Now if Hume is to be assimilated to the legal-historical approach, it is necessary to reduce the apparent tension between this latter view and the philosophical position that is often attributed to him. The tension derives from the fact that, on the one hand, according to the legal-historical view, both sense perception and testimony are ways of openness to the world in which complex abilities are at work that require the employment of normative concepts such as "just", "impartial", or "normal". Moreover, in order for someone to be just in his appreciation of facts -- even at an intuitive level – we must suppose that he possesses a great deal of background knowledge in order to account for the corrections that are necessary to *establish* a fact; corrections that involve an implicit process of weighing input information, be it sense data or testimony. Basically, one has to suppose that a competent "judge of facts" is someone who has a good command of some relevant social or conventional rules that enable him to implicitly identify the appropriate "conditions of observation" for a given type of facts. On the other hand, it seems that such a complex account of perception exceeds by far the scope of Hume's theory of perception and concept

formation. At the same time, the legal-historical approach to empirical knowledge implies that the experience necessary for our perceiving facts needs to be a public experience, whereas in Hume's empiricist theory, as it is often interpreted, there is only room for private experience.

In the present chapter I argue that there is no such tension in Hume, and that his theory of perception and concept formation is consistent with the legal-historical approach I have described. Furthermore, I will also claim that once his account of perception is understood it becomes clear that Hume does not subscribe to a conception of experience as being private, but, on the contrary, that he thinks that the experience necessary to have a just notion of facts -- both in the empirical and the moral domain -- must always be the extended experience of someone who has a historical point of view. The historical point of view is a point of view that, by including implicit knowledge of the history of humanity, enables one to have much more complex and nuanced perceptions of the world, both moral and natural, surrounding him, perceptions of complexities and nuances allowing for mechanisms of correction that secure the objectivity of our knowledge of the world. The historical point of view constitutes an objective point of view that emerges out of an understanding of the plurality of points of view that are displayed in history. It does not seek the impossible perspective of an ideal observer. Objectivity is something that is attained within the social interplay of points of view and is the result of a sympathetic effort to understand what is common in this multiplicity. I also argue that Hume's project of a science of human nature is to be understood as a systematic reconsideration of the traditional concepts and problems of philosophy that is achieved from the point of view I have defined as historical. What the historical point of view achieves at the level of metaphysics is a liberation from the anxieties provoked by either the reduction of the human point of view to an individualistic perspective or the search for an absolute point of view that transcends the horizon of the human practices and interests. The historical point of view accommodates at the level of metaphysics a necessary skepticism about what escapes human scrutiny with a critical acceptance of

the practices of validation in disputes in which competent judges have the means to pronounce a verdict.

4.2 Perception and conception

The crucial question for the viability of an interpretation of Hume as giving a central role in his science of human nature to some form of historical consciousness is whether there is room in his theory of mind, and in his explanation of concept use and concept formation, for what could be labeled "public ideas." Were Hume to be interpreted as a phenomenalist, that is, were Hume to be taken as claiming that only those terms that are reducible to private happenings in the mind have meaning, then a gap would have to be acknowledged between the objects of our awareness -- mental states -- and those things to which these mental states purport to refer. For many of the things that are predicable of my mental states are not predicable of the objects to which they refer, and vice versa. Thus if the concepts "this mountain" and "my finger" were to be reduced to my personal mental images then it would be legitimate to claim that under certain conditions of observations "my finger" is bigger than "this mountain", whereas when the conditions of observation change "this mountain" grows bigger than "my finger." Nothing in my private perception of "my finger" and "this mountain" would logically entail any talk about the finger and the mountain as being stable real objects preserving their size irrespective of conditions of observation. It seems that if we see Hume as adopting a conception of the private origin of concepts in personal experience it becomes very difficult to show how these personal concepts would allow us to share with others a public objective world and to have a common repertoire of concepts necessary for a public language.

This issue has divided Hume scholars. Some, like Antony Flew, hold the standard view of Hume as entertaining a private conception of experience and the origin of

concepts.[1] Others, like Donald Livingston, think that our ideas "are internal to the public world of common life."[2] Flew believes that, save for the introduction of the distinction between impressions and ideas, there is no important Humean contribution to Locke's theory and that much of what can be rightly asserted of Locke's theory can be extended to Hume's. Flew maintains that "in Hume's official view ideas always just are mental images" and that "the meaning of the words are ideas."[3] In Flew's view, these basic assumptions can only lead to a conception of language and experience as logically private, a conception that renders any reference to a public world problematic. At the same time, Flew recognizes that when he is not on guard, Hume often "abandons" the standard view to "say things which are hard or impossible to square with this official position."[4] As an example of Hume's inconsistency with respect to his "official position" Flew suggests the following passage: "All the colours of poetry, however splendid, can never paint natural objects in such a manner as to make the description be taken for a real landscape" (EHU 2.1). In Flew's view, this passage, which is supposed to illustrate the claim that ideas can never reach the vivacity of impressions, is "incongruous." For Flew, the passage is not an example of the use of ideas, which he interprets as being mental images: "Hume is now talking of something of an altogether different order, descriptions." He adds that "physical objects and real landscapes cannot be allocated to the same category as impressions."[5]

Flew believes that Hume's wanderings on and off the "official position" are due to a fundamental confusion between a psychological description of our mental imagery

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[1] This view has been clearly expressed in Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief: A Study of the First Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). Flew reasserts the "standard view'" in Antony Flew, "Impressions and Experiences: Public or Private," *Hume Studies* 11, no. 2 (1987): 183-91.

[2] Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life.*, p. 65.

[3] Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief: A Study of the First Enquiry*, p.22.

[4] Ibid., p. 22.

[5] Ibid., p. 28.

and a semantic theory of meaning. He owns that Hume mistakenly takes his "psychological thesis about the limitations of the capacity to form mental imagery" as a good basis to say things about the meaningfulness of words. The crucial problem, again, is that the psychological theory concerns logically private objects -- mental images -- whereas a semantic theory is concerned with the public meaning of words and sentences. Following the traditional criticism of psychologism, Flew argues that Hume is not logically allowed to use his psychological theory of ideas to say things about the public reference of words and sentences, and that whenever he does so it has to be noted that he is being inconsistent, namely, that he has abandoned his "official position."

Livingston, on the contrary, thinks that the difficulty vanishes as soon as we go beyond book 1 of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, where the majority of interpreters stop, and attempt to understand Hume's epistemology in the light of some of Hume's important findings in morals. Central to understanding Hume on the use of public concepts, Livingston contends, is Hume's analysis of conventions and "general standards." In Livingston's view Hume has two stories about the acquisition of "ideas". On the one hand, perception is the process of acquiring mental imagery, that is, private impressions and ideas. On the other hand, we acquire concepts (ideas in the public sense) not by perceiving but by progressively assimilating and mastering the implicit rules of linguistic practices.

> Hume uses the word "idea" in two senses. In one sense an idea is an image, in which case we may be said to either have an idea or not (it is in this sense that Hume can say, for instance, that we have no idea at all of necessary connection). But in another sense having an idea is being able to follow a rule in a linguistic convention [...].[6]

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[6] Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life.*, p. 77.

Livingston's claim implies that Hume is committed both to an empiricist psychology and to a pragmatist theory of meaning and concept acquisition. He also gives a story about how the two accounts are combined in our everyday comprehension of concepts. On the one hand, Livingston claims that our grasping public meanings -- "ideas" as learned in linguistic practices -- is independent of our having personal imagery. Thus, it is perfectly possible for a blind person to learn the correct moves in the language game using color words and thus to be able to use the term "green" in ways that are recognized as appropriate by the other participants in the game. In that sense, it is possible to say that someone lacking the relevant private experience can nevertheless master the use of public concepts. But in another, crucial sense a blind person cannot be said to *fully* understand the meaning of color words. The private mental imagery serves to complete our grasp of public meanings by securing what Livingston calls an "interior understanding," that is, a private grasp on concepts.[7] In this reading of Hume, concepts like "necessary connection" or "external object" do have a meaning in the external sense but lack one in the internal sense. Hence Hume's caution about our legitimate use of these key metaphysical concepts is not to be seen as a denial of their meaningfulness -- for a public mastering of their use does indeed obtain -- but as a rejection of the claim that we have *full* understanding of these concepts.

Livingston's insistence on the pragmatist aspect of Hume's theory of concepts points in the same direction as my suggestion that Hume adopts a legal-historical conception of the relation between mind and world. For Livingston sees that the different conventions that govern our public practices presuppose in each of these practices a common point of view defining an order of objectivity: "[t]here is the moral point of view, the aesthetic point of view, the natural point of view [...] the historical point of view."[8] I am not sure, however, that Livingston's account of the relation between what

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[7] Ibid., p. 78.

[8] Ibid., p. 70.

he calls internal and external understanding squares well with Hume's theory of perception. Neither do I think that conventionalism is the best way to describe how Hume accounts for our public use of concepts.

One of the problems with the views of both Flew and Livingston is that they try to map Hume's position onto some contemporary position in semantics and philosophy of mind. However, as Livingston recognizes, Hume shows little concern for a theory of meaning and it will not do to claim, as Flew does, that since Hume adopts Locke's theory of ideas he must also be adopting his conception of the private meaning of words. Also, Livingston and Flew agree more than they realize, for Livingston shares the "standard interpretation" with regard to our "internal understanding" while claiming that this is not the end of the Humean story about concepts. Livingston can be seen as claiming that Hume's psychologism is sufficient for explaining our private experience, whereas his conventionalism accounts for the normative aspect of concept use.

While going roughly in the same direction as Livingston, I nevertheless maintain that Hume's goal is not that of aligning what is given in our perceptual and psychological apparatus with what is given in social practices. Rather, for Hume public "meanings" are immediately present in the act of perception. For Hume, conventions are constitutive -- not regulative -- of perception. Hence, Hume can be seen to be holding a thesis that is often attributed to post-Kantian idealists such as Hegel, namely, that to perceive *is* to conceive.[9] But to see that this is so it is necessary to review Hume's theory of impressions and ideas.

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[9] Much needs to be said about the connection between some of Hume's theses and post-Kantian idealism. The traditions of offering a strong idealist interpretation of Hegel and a strong empiricist interpretation of Hume have made it difficult even to think of that connection. But in late eighteenth century Germany it was not uncommon to see Hume as a "skeptical idealist", and as such he was taken by, for instance, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. See Jacobi, *David Hume uber den Glauben; oder Idealismus und Realismus* (Breslau,: Loewe, 1787); English translation in Jacobi, *The*

The first interesting feature of Hume's "way of ideas" is that, while it relies heavily on Locke's theory of ideas, it introduces two substantive modifications. The first is that Hume decides to call "perceptions" what Locke referred to as "ideas," namely, all that of which the mind is aware, including acts of mind. The second is that he introduces a distinction between the more lively perceptions that we usually take as original and the less lively copies of these perceptions as they are recalled in memory, occur in thought, or are forecast by the imagination. He calls the former "impressions" and the latter "ideas." In reserving the term "idea" for the fainter perceptions as they occur in memory, imagination and thought, Hume sees himself as restoring "the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. *Locke* had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions" (T 1.1.1.1 n. 2). Hume classes sensations, passions and emotions in the category of impressions, and the copies of these in thinking, memory or imagination he assigns to the class of ideas. Hume also claims that impressions and ideas can be either *simple* or *complex*, that is, he thinks that some impressions and ideas are an aggregate of other unanalyzable perceptions.

Unfortunately for us, Hume also thought that the distinction between impressions and ideas was so evident that it "will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking"(T 1.1.1.1). Neither does he feel the need for further clarification in the first *Enquiry*: "It requires no nice discernment or metaphysical

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Main Philosophical Writings, trans. George di Giovanni (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994). In recent scholarship, Kenneth Westphal's work is noteworthy. See Kenneth R. Westphal, "Hegel and Hume on Perception and Concept-Empiricism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36: pp. 99-123; *Hegel und die Identität wahrnehmbarer Dinge* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1998). For the reception of Hume in Germany, see George di Giovanni, "Hume, Jacobi, and Common Sense: an Episode in the Reception of Hume in Germany at the Time of Kant," *Kant-Studien* 89: 44-58; Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

head to mark the distinction between them" (EHU 2.2). At first sight, Hume can be taken as suggesting an intuitive distinction between the vivacity of the two kinds of perceptions, since he asks the reader to interpret the distinction between impressions and ideas as a distinction between feeling and thinking. But at the same time he qualifies this general rule by saying there are cases -- mental illness, feverish states, hallucinations, dreams, etc -- in which an idea can convey as much vivacity as an impression (T 1.1.1.1; EHU 2.1). It seems thus that vivacity is a useful indicator of the distinction between impressions and ideas, but it is not a fully satisfactory one. In cases like the ones mentioned, a further criterion seems to be wanting.[10]

Impressions and ideas are further distinguished by the fact that the former causes the latter. This relationship is set out in what is commonly called the *copy principle*, namely, *"that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent"* (T 1.1.1.7). Thus, for example, my impression of red must be prior to my having an idea of red. As Hume puts it "[n]o discovery cou'd have been made more happily for deciding all controversies concerning ideas, than that above-mention'd, that impressions always take the precedency of them, and that every idea, with which the imagination is furnish'd, first makes its appearance in a correspondent impression" (T 1.2.3.1). However, the copy principle establishes a one-to-one relationship between only *simple* ideas and impressions. Complex ideas cannot always be said to be derived from a correspondent complex impression, for some of our complex ideas, say that of a golden apple, are the product of a combination of different simple ideas by the imagination and, thus, no simple causal story can be given for them. But even at the level of simple impressions and ideas the precedency rule does not always obtain. Hume's adherence to the principle of sympathy, by which ideas may be converted into

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[10] Tom Beauchamp suggests that a criterion of reliability should be added to the vivacity criterion in order to obtain a satisfactory distinction between impressions and ideas. See his Editor's Introduction to EHU, p. 17.

impressions, shows that he also believes that some impressions can be "caused" by ideas and hence also be temporally prior to them.

Perhaps a better way of establishing what distinguishes impressions from ideas could be to discriminate between those perceptions -- ideas -- that are susceptible of being drawn together in thoughts such as those that occur in thinking and those perceptions -- impressions -- that cannot be thus gathered. This will be consistent with Hume's suggestion that the distinction consists in an attempt to capture the difference between thinking and feeling. However, this difference provides only hints without giving a sufficient condition for the distinction between impressions and ideas. For, although in his first treatment of natural relations in *Treatise* 1.1.4 Hume only deals with relations between ideas, in *Treatise*, 2.1.4.3 he somehow blurs the distinction by saying that some impressions can be associated by resemblance.

> The second property I shall observe in the human mind is a like association of impressions. All resembling impressions are connected together, and no sooner one arises than the rest immediately follow. Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be completed. [...] 'Tis evident, then, there is an attraction or association among impressions, as well as among ideas; tho' with this remarkable difference, that ideas are associated by resemblance, contiguity, and causation; and impressions only by resemblance (T 2.1.4.3).

Now if thinking is defined merely as the transition from one perception to another, then it has to be acknowledged that to a certain, though very limited, extent, impressions may be involved in "thinking" because the resemblance of one impression to another is likely to beget a transition from one to the other. However, much of what we normally understand to be "thinking" depends on the possibility of making causal transitions and establishing spatio-temporal relations. In this decisive sense the distinction between perceptions susceptible to being drawn together by relations of causality and contiguity and those that can only be related by resemblance does flag an important difference between ideas and impressions.

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To understand why the distinction between impressions and ideas is puzzling or not entirely satisfactory it is important to be aware of the expectations this distinction is supposed to meet. Why would we need a sharp distinction between impressions and ideas, and not be content with the general category "perceptions" that includes items (passions, emotions, concepts) that are anyway different in many respects? As Barry Stroud has pointed out, much of the point of the distinction lies in Hume's need to give a genetic account of ideas, namely, of explaining their origin. Stroud argues that only by showing that ideas originate in something other than yet further ideas can Hume hope to have a good argument against innateness, or the claim that at least some ideas are to be found in the mind prior to any experience.[11] One such argument might be that an impression is whatever is caused by the presence of an external object before the senses. But Hume explicitly refuses to take this line of argument:

> As to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses (T 1.3.5.2).

Hume is thus left with no choice but to attempt to distinguish between impressions and ideas internally. The difference in vivacity, although not entirely without counter-examples, illustrates sufficiently a distinction that is otherwise very hard to pin down given the constraints that Hume has imposed on himself: "The first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity" (T 1.1.1.3). But if this does not seem enough to interpreters like Stroud it is because they are expecting Hume to

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[11] Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 32.

give an account of the origins of ideas by reference to sense perception, without which account they think Hume would find himself without arguments against innatists. To put it otherwise, if Hume wants to distinguish himself from innatists, then he must refer our possession and use of concepts to experience. And, if he wants to avoid circularity he must mean by "experience" something that does not presuppose conceptual capacities. For that reason Hume's notion of experience, which he never clearly defines, is often taken to be simply "sense-experience", where this term is taken to be a synonym of "sense-perception." Stroud, for instance finds that the central tenet of Hume's theory of ideas is that "[t]here is no thought or mental activity unless there are impressions of sensation."[12] Don Garrett also thinks Hume is committed to what he calls "conceptual empiricism" or the view "that the semantic content of thought is always fully derived from things or features of things as they have been encountered in sensory or reflective experience," where what is given are imagistic representations.[13]

The views so far considered regarding Hume on impressions and ideas could be summarized as follows. First, there is Flew's claim that ideas are not concepts -- in the sense that they do not or cannot refer to a public world -- but only private mental images. According to this view Hume's theory of ideas fails to be a theory of concepts because it fails to bridge the gap between cognitive psychology and semantics. Second, there is Livingston's claim that some ideas are only mental images and some are concepts. In this view ideas, to the extent that they refer to impressions, are private and grant only an "internal understanding", while the ideas that do refer to a public world do so not because they are derived from impressions, but because they reflect an ability to make adequate moves in social and linguistic practices. Finally, interpreters such as Stroud or Garrett seek to show that the distinction between impressions and ideas is a distinction between non-conceptual and conceptual mental

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[12] Ibid., p. 22.

[13] Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, p. 33.

content, where the non-conceptual contents are mental images as they are encountered in sensory experience. What all these views share in common is the claim that, at one level or another, Hume must be referring the content of thought to non-conceptual representations as they are given in perception.

It is very difficult to find a solution to the puzzles of Hume's theory of impressions and ideas, not least because Hume, believing that the distinction was obvious, gave us so few clues to their solution. In an effort to solve at least some of these puzzles, I will argue that Hume's understanding of moral and aesthetic perception gives us the elements lacking in the sections treating the origin of ideas in the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*. According to the reading I am proposing, there is no difference in kind between impressions and ideas; there is only, as Hume says, a difference in vivacity. I will argue that the passage from the non-referential original happenings, impressions, to the referential role of ideas can in part be construed as a function of the intensity of the perceptions.

I think the distinction Hume has in mind corresponds not to a sharp distinction between items of feeling and items of thinking but, rather, to a distinction between feelings whose intensity dazzles the mind and gentler feelings that do not hinder the mind's capacity to maintain awareness of other items at the same time. Think for example of an intense pain. It is very difficult to have anything else in mind when one is subject to a very intense pain -- one can hardly think of anything else but being relieved of the pain. It is also a commonplace that intense passions often blind a person so that he cannot properly think or behave as he would normally. Hume's claim that impressions are more lively than ideas, conjoined with the claim that impressions cannot be associated by relations of causality and contiguity, amounts to the claim that intense perceptions keep the mind's attention so focused on them that it loses its awareness of other potentially relevant objects. To continue with commonplaces, the *tree* of impression prevents the mind from seeing the *forest* of other potentially relevant perceptions. The impression is just there; it strongly attracts

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the mind's attention but does not *refer* to anything else. An impression is an event in the mind and as such it is not referential. Hume makes this point in reference to the passions, which are an important subset of impressions:

> A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent (T 2.3.3.5).

The next, decisive question is: how can the same perception, when endowed with less vivacity, acquire the referential properties proper to concepts? The answer is to be found in Hume's discussion of aesthetic perception in "Of the Standard of Taste." In this essay Hume is concerned with explaining how it is that our aesthetic responses, which for an anti-rationalist like Hume must be based on our private sentiments of pleasure or displeasure, can nevertheless yield an objective standard of taste on which aesthetic judgments can be based. The essay explicitly addresses the question of reference with respect to aesthetic sentiments and suggests, by way of many analogies, that the answer it gives to the problem can be extended to private impressions begetting public concepts:

> 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. Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right (E-ST 230).

But how is it that reference to a matter of fact can emerge when the only materials available to us are sentiments? How is it that non-referential sentiments can suddenly acquire a reference to an objective matter of fact? Hume's answer in the essay on aesthetic judgment is that the reference to an objective matter of fact results from referring sentiments to experience. This claim, however, needs to be unpacked.

In "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume argues that "[w]hen objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment, which attends them, is obscure and confused; and the mind is, in a great measure, incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects" (E-ST 237). However, if we allow the observer "to acquire experience in those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and nice: He not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but marks the distinguishing species of each quality, and assigns it suitable praise or blame [...]The mist dissipates, which seemed formerly to hang over the object: The organ acquires greater perfection in its operations; and can pronounce, without danger of mistake, concerning the merits of every performance" (E-ST 237). Here Hume is clearly presenting a case in which the initial perception is insufficient to beget any perceptual judgment on aesthetic objects. For to pronounce a just perceptual judgment, that is, to "dissipate the mist" and have a clearer sight on the objects, it is necessary to refer the perception to experience.

This reference to experience is not a reference to a non-conceptual, primitive mental event, but reference to a *practice*. It is through practice that the organ of perception acquires the skill required to make expert, that is, nuanced and clear, perceptions. Neither is the practice Hume refers to an entirely personal practice. He is not suggesting that contemplating, say, a Picasso hundred of times is sufficient to judge its aesthetic qualities. Rather, perceptual talent is improved by repeated contemplation and a "*practice* in a particular art" (E-ST 237). The practice in a particular art, be it literary criticism, drama, etc., implies the acquisition of general rules that are produced in any particular discipline. These general rules are nothing but a condensation of the history of that art; a distillation of what has been gained in the

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practice of the discipline. These general rules are used in turn to train beginners in the subtleties and skills proper to that particular art. In Hume's view these general rules are not arbitrary conventions, not something that a guild or secret sect of literary critics determine at will. Nor are they the result of "abstract conclusions of the understanding" or reasonings *a priori*: "[t]heir foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they any thing but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages" (E-ST 231). That is to say, Hume believes that general rules express a customary tendency to approve certain aesthetic objects and to disapprove others; that there is a constant conjunction between certain qualities attributed to aesthetic objects and the feelings of praise or blame.

However, only someone taking a historical point of view is in a position to establish these rules or empirical generalizations. For in order to establish an objective standard of taste it is necessary to *compare* different perceptions. Comparison of sentiments is even necessary in order to establish a personal or private standard of taste: "[a] man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him. By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise or blame, and learn how to assign the due degree to each" (E-ST 238). In order to acquire an objective standard of aesthetic judgment, personal experience and comparison is insufficient. Comparison has to be "historical": "[o]ne accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the productions of genius" (E-ST 238). Of course, Hume is not suggesting that only historians of art can be good critics. One can learn the rules of art criticism in ways that involve no strong commitment to the study of history. Hume's point is that, to the question of how it is that an aesthetic judgment refers to an objective standard, only a reference to the history of criticism can be given by way of answer. Anyone who judges abides by general rules and these rules refer, implicitly or explicitly, to past experience in the

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practice of judging. This past experience can be very limited, and refer only to personal practices of judging, or it can be extended and include past experience as it is recorded in "all countries and in all ages." Only the historical extension of a standard can be cited as warrant of the objectivity of a rule of criticism.

Objectivity in aesthetic judgment is reached in a way similar to the process creating objectivity in moral judgment. As I have shown in chapter 3, extensive sympathy is a manner of awareness of moral facts that, though construed out of merely personal sentiments, succeeds in making the subject depart from his personal and prejudiced point of view. Hume proposes a similar mechanism in the case of aesthetic taste. He argues that a critic who is not biased by prejudice is someone who recognizes that an object can be perceived from more than one point of view, and who construes his own, historical, point of view as a collection (or rather recollection) of these different perspectives. Thus a critic having an historical point of view can appreciate the beauty of a historical work of art even though, were that work produced by a contemporary, she would not hesitate to disapprove it.

> We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance (E-ST 239).

Hume argues that a critic "of a different age or nation" who would consider the performance of an ancient orator, must take into consideration that the orator addressed himself to an audience entertaining a substantially different set of beliefs, passions and prejudices. Accordingly, the modern critic "must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration" (E-ST 239). The historical point of view enables him to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of objects he would not appreciate if guided by his own prejudiced personal point of view. Hume does not imply that beauty is entirely relative to a specific point of view. Rather, he suggests only that

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having an extended aesthetic taste helps us to recognize the objectively beautiful qualities of a performance in spite of all the elements that we consider alien.

This ability to have or make refined or skilled perceptions, and to see beauty in works that one would otherwise immediately reject is what Hume calls *delicacy of taste*, and corresponds in aesthetics to the *sagacity* required in causal explanations and the *enlightened sensibility* necessary to moral judgment. Delicacy of taste makes it possible to perceive what untrained perceivers cannot: "A good palate is not tried by strong flavours; but by a mixture of small ingredients, where we are still sensible of each part, notwithstanding its minuteness and its confusion with the rest" (E-ST 236).

Hume is thus committed to rejecting the old saying that *de gustibus non est disputandum*. Disputes about taste can indeed be solved by referring them to two factual questions. The first is whether a given aesthetic general standard adequately represents the overall tendency of human aesthetic responses, whether it represents, as Hume puts it, "models and principles, which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages" (E-ST 237). The second factual question is whether the object has been correctly or justly perceived. Agreeing on what in fact is the natural aesthetic standard and solving the question of whether the object has been adequately perceived helps in turn to correct or confirm initial aesthetic responses. An expert judge can cite *reasons* for judging as he does of the aesthetic qualities of an object, reasons that can be recognized by non-expert perceivers:

> [W]hen we show [a bad critic] an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle, when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case; where he did not perceive or feel its influence. He must conclude, . upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse (E-ST 236).

As we can see, for Hume, aesthetic perception, to the extent that it has a reference, be this only a minimal reference to personal taste, is not an act of passively receiving sense data, but an act of referring sentiments to a past experience that is inferentially relevant to that perception.

It is now time to see whether this view of perception can be extended to other contexts, and particularly whether there is evidence for this view in works like the *Treatise*. A brief survey of this work shows that although, as has been pointed out, there is no thorough discussion of theories of perception in it, Hume endorses and relies on theories of perception that give to concepts and understanding a central role in constituting the objectivity and stability of our perceptual field. There is evidence that Hume thinks that there is a general analogy between sense perception and moral or aesthetic perception. In "Of the Standard of Taste," for instance, he refers to the "great resemblance between mental and bodily taste" (E-ST 235). In the *Treatise*, when he explains how is it that by extensive sympathy we can sympathize with persons and actions that bear only a remote relation to ourselves, he maintains that "[t]he case is here the same as in our judgments concerning external bodies. All objects seem to diminish by their distance: But tho' the appearance of objects to our senses be the original standard, by which we judge of them, yet we do not say, that they actually diminish by the distance; but correcting the appearance by reflection, arrive at a more constant and establish'd judgment concerning them" (T 3.3.3.2).[14]

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[14] A similar statement is to be found in the second *Enquiry*: "A statesman or patriot, who serves our own country, in our own time, has always a more passionate regard paid to him, than one whose beneficial influence operated on distant ages or remote nations; where the good, resulting from his generous humanity, being less connected with us, seems more obscure, and affects us with a less lively sympathy. We may own the merit to be equally great, though our sentiments are not raised to an equal height, in both cases. The judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. The same object, at a double distance, really throws on the eye a picture of but half the bulk; yet we imagine that it appears of the same size in both situations; because we know, that, on our approach to

It is the understanding and reason that provide the tools for correcting perception. In this respect, Hume relies on dominant theories of vision that were elaborated by Descartes' *Optics* (1637), Malebranche's *Search after Truth* and *Elucidations* (1674-75) and Berkeley's *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709). All of these works suppose that the understanding or reason plays an important part in perception, particularly in allowing us to assign depth and relative size to the two-dimensional images received in the retina. Hume explicitly cites this approach to optics in *Treatise* 1.2.5.8, there claiming that "'Tis commonly allow'd by philosophers, that all bodies, which discover themselves to the eye, appear as if painted on a plane surface, and that their different degrees of remoteness from ourselves are discover'd more by reason than by the senses." And Hume took for granted that those of his readers that "are acquainted with the metaphysical part of optics [...] know how we transfer the judgments and conclusions of the understanding to the senses" (T 2.2.8.6).[15]

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it, its image would expand on the eye, and that the difference consists not in the object itself, but in our position with regard to it. And, indeed, without such a correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions" (EPM 5.41).

[15] In the annotations to their forthcoming critical edition of the *Treatise*, David and Mary Norton observe that Hume was perhaps thinking of Malebranche's *Elucidation* 16, on Optics, when he mentioned the "metaphysical part of optics." In that work Malebranche explicitly draws metaphysical conclusions from what was otherwise a mainstream Cartesian approach to optics. The editors also refer to Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des anciens* (Paris: Chez Jean Baptiste Coignard, 1683); Jacques Rohault, *System of Natural Philosophy*, trans. J. Clarke (London: James Knapton, 1723). See annotation to p. 241.39-40 in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton ed., *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming). For an interesting discussion of the philosophical implications of eighteenth-century theories of optics and perception, see Gary C. Hatfield, *The Natural and the Normative: Theories of Spatial Perception from Kant to Helmholtz* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

It was thus common to think of sense perception in terms of mechanisms of correction and, particularly, in terms of corrections involving reasoning. To find Hume echoing this approach to sense perception is, therefore, not surprising. The important question, however, is whether Hume allows for a constitutive, or only for a regulative, role of reasoning in perception. For it is exactly at this point that the genetic account of the origin of our ideas connects with the normative story about the public use of concepts. If, on the one hand, the understanding and reason play only a regulative role, then one can wonder how is it that we have public concepts that can correct our private grasp of things. One can adopt either Flew's view and say that Hume cannot give an account of our acquisition of public concepts, and therefore that he has no means of explaining how is it that the understanding corrects the senses. Or one can follow Livingston and say that there are two sources of concepts, the private, empiricist one and the social, pragmatist one, and that the rules we learn in public discursive practices help to correct our private grasp of things. If, on the other hand, reason is to be given a constitutive role in perception, then the issue takes a completely different turn since, on this reading, there would be no gap between private events in the mind and "public ideas."

A careful reading reveals that Hume was committed to the claim that concepts are constitutive of perception. More radically put, Hume thought that perception and conception are the same. The claim is stated in a footnote in book 3 of the *Treatise* that has only recently received detailed attention.[16] This note deserves to be quoted in length:

> We may here take occasion to observe a very remarkable error, which being frequently inculcated in the schools, has become a kind of establish'd maxim, and is universally receiv'd by all logicians. This error consists in the vulgar division of the acts of the understanding,

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[16] David Owen, *Hume's Reason*, pp. 62-82.

into *conception, judgment* and *reasoning*, and in the definitions we give of them. Conception is defin'd to be the simple survey of one or more ideas: Judgment to be the separating or uniting of different ideas: Reasoning to be the separating or uniting of different ideas by the interposition of others, which show the relation they bear to each other. But these distinctions and definitions are faulty in very considerable articles. For *first*, 'tis far from being true, that in every judgment, which we form, we unite two different ideas; since in that proposition, *God is*, or indeed any other, which regards existence, the idea of existence is no distinct idea, which we unite with that of the object, and which is capable of forming a compound idea by the union. *Secondly*, As we can thus form a proposition, which contains only one idea, so we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium betwixt them. We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others, and more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes. What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects. Whether we consider a single object, or several; whether we dwell on these objects, or run from them to others; and in whatever form or order we survey them, the act of the mind exceeds not a simple conception; and the only remarkable difference, which occurs on this occasion, is, when we join belief to the conception, and are perswaded of the truth of what we conceive. This act of the mind has never yet been explain'd by any philosopher; and therefore I am at liberty to propose my hypothesis concerning it; which is, that 'tis only a strong and steady conception of any idea, and such as approaches in some measure to an immediate impression (T 1.3.7.5 n.20).

In the light of what is said in this footnote we can understand the importance of Hume's label "perceptions" for the objects Locke called "ideas." Hume wants to think of the various cognitive acts -- traditionally thought to be the separate contribution of independent cognitive faculties -- as being a continuum of forms of the one single act of perception/conception. If one recalls that for Hume all the objects of awareness, including acts of mind, are "perceptions", then the preceding quotation can also be read as an identification of conception and perception. As he puts it, "[t]o hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive" (T 1.2.6.7). To

perceive/conceive a single idea or complex of ideas is to have an *immediate* perception of an object, where by "immediate" is meant that the ideas are "seen" without the mediation of other ideas. When we perceive objects through their inferential relation to other ideas, the result is not a chain of ideas but a new, more complex, perception. In that new perception not only do we see the objects, but also the relations of resemblance, contiguity and causality that they entertain *vis-à-vis* other objects. Not only do I perceive a table but also *that* the table is in the dining room next to the window, *that* it belonged to my grandparents, *that* it has on it several marks made by me when I was a child and was visiting my grandparents, *that* it needs restoration, and so on. In the same manner, when I perceive the portrait of Anna Zborowska by Modigliani, I can merely perceive the figure of a woman with an abnormally elongated neck or I can give complexity to my perception by also seeing the melancholy that is expressed by the slight inclination of the head and the lifeless candle that stands behind her against a gray wall. I may perceive that the portrait has been painted by Modigliani as I recognize the style. My perception can also be enriched by my own sympathetic sentiments (i.e. I can also feel melancholic in contemplating the portrait) and aesthetic approval. In sum, our perception of an object extends as far as our thought or our imagination, can carry us.

This reading is consistent with the way Hume uses the verb "to perceive" throughout his works, which almost always has the meaning of "to realize," "to become aware of," "to think of" or "to conceive." Hume's use of that verb reveals that he thinks one can *perceive* the falsehood of propositions (T 1.1. 7.8), the "repugnance" among ideas, or the absurdity of propositions (T 1.1.7.14). One can also *perceive* the constant conjunction between two ideas or that "the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience" (T 1.4.2.44). It is also possible to "perceive a good to become either possible or probable" (T 2.1.10.7), and to perceive advantages (T 2.2.8.17 and 3.2.9.2). Hume gives the following example of how skilled perception succeeds in bringing about more accurate conceptions of a state of affairs:

> A peasant can give no better reason for the stopping of any clock or watch than to say, that commonly it does not go right: But an artizan easily *perceives*, that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels; but fails of its usual effect, perhaps by reason of a grain of dust, which puts a stop to the whole movement (T 1.3.12.5 and EHU 8.13, emphasis mine).

With this identification of perception and conception in mind it is possible to reconstruct what I have been suggesting about the relation between perception and the use of public concepts. Sentiments acquire a reference to objective matters of fact when they can be placed in larger inferential contexts provided by experience. Impressions are also sentiments, but, because they are so lively, they so dazzle the mind that it cannot place the sentiment in a larger perceptual field. On the other hand, ideas, being fainter than impressions, make it easy for the mind to survey larger contexts. Ideas have a larger inferential role, since they can be placed not only in relations of resemblance but also of causality and contiguity. My initial perception of an apple is always immediately tied to previous perceptions of apples, so that the idea that I now have is found to resemble the others, in ways that make it possible to individuate and identify the present apple. Thanks also to past experience, I immediately perceive that it is something that can be eaten, that it can fall from a tree, and that it is here and now before me and contiguous to other perceptions, in ways that secure the coherence and stability of my total perception. The implicit inferences that concur in my perception of the apple constitute a larger perception by which a discourse about there being an apple before me has been made possible. Implicit or reflexive reasoning is thus constitutive of perception in that it makes it possible for the perception to have a reference. To perceive is to place a sentiment in an extended inferential context and it is the inferential context that provides the perception with a reference.

This reading does not solve all the puzzles related to Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas. For example, it does not explain how "mental images" can suddenly become discursive concepts. But it is not clear to me that a satisfactory

solution to all the puzzles can be found in the context of Hume's philosophy and terminology given Hume's relative unconcern with the relation between his theory of perceptions and language. A contemporary attempt to tackle this issue has been made by Michael Dummett, who distinguishes between pre-discursive concepts and reasoning (which he calls "proto-thoughts") and the full-fledged use of concepts in discursive thinking. By this distinction Dummett intends to capture the kind of implicit "thinking" that occurs when one, for example, in crossing a street "regulates" one's own speed to accord with the "estimate" of the speed of the cars coming in one's direction, and the explicit thinking making use of language.[17] Further arguments for the thesis that concepts are involved in perception can also be found in John McDowell's *Mind and World*, and in Robert Brandom's *Making it Explicit*.[18] But it would be unreasonable to expect Hume to give an answer to the contemporary formulation of these puzzles. I do think, however, that Hume's dialectic between limited and extended perception, in the moral, aesthetic and empirical domains, is helpful for understanding both what he means by "experience" when he refers all knowledge to it, and to what extent the experience to which he refers constitutes objectivity from what I have called the historical point of view.

4.3 History and the stretching of experience

If for Hume concepts are constitutive of perception, and concepts are necessarily public, then this reading of him provides a solution to what has been taken as a major problem of his philosophy, namely, its reluctance, so to speak, to include socially transmitted experience as a reliable source of belief fixation. As I have pointed out in chapter 2, Campbell and Reid already leveled against Hume the charge of entertaining a conception of experience as private, and of ignoring the role of socially transmitted

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[17] See Dummett's chapter on "Proto-thoughts" in Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[18] Robert Brandom, *Making it Explici*, John McDowell, *Mind and World* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

experience in shaping our most basic beliefs. Flew's "standard view" of impressions and experience as private reinforces this picture of Hume as defending an untenable conception of the subject as a totally autonomous knower.

In chapter 2 I have also argued, however, that Hume accepts that testimony may be as reliable as personal observation in belief-forming processes. I want here to link that claim with the story I have given about perception and conception in Hume. I submit that testimony, and hence that socially transmitted beliefs, are for Hume constitutive of personal experience in such a way that experience can only be said to be private in the sense that it is always the experience of a single or individual person. Accordingly, what Hume has in mind when he refers all knowledge to experience is a much more complex notion of experience than is typically realized. Experience for Hume includes not only personal observation and beliefs transmitted via testimony, but also refers (as we have seen in his discussion of the standard of taste) to social practices. Our ability to have more refined perceptions, which is to say our ability to have more sophisticated conceptions, depends on our ability to extend our experience.

Part of the difficulty of crediting Hume with this more inclusive notion of experience comes from the ambiguity associated with the term as it has been used in the philosophical tradition. "Experience" has at least two relevant meanings in modern English. It is either a) direct observation of or participation in events, or b), the fact or state of having been affected by, or having gained knowledge through, direct observation or participation. Additionally, there are several other senses of the word "experience" that derive from the second meaning laid down here. In this sense, "to have experience" means also to have the practical knowledge or a particular skill (and even wisdom) that *results* from direct observation or participation in events. "Experience" is also the collection of particular events that make up an individual's life or the life of a collective whole such as a nation or a party. In sum, "experience" in the second sense is the result of a collection of "experiences" in the first sense. We can thus distinguish between a wider and a narrower notion of experience.

The philosophical tradition plays ambiguously with these two meanings of "experience". The first standard use of this concept comes from Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* where it is claimed that "Man derives experience (*empeiria*) from memory: his several acts of memory give rise to a single effect which we call experience."[19] This definition of experience, which comes closest to our second sense, remained almost unchallenged through the Middle Ages and in the school philosophers in the early modern period.[20] One of the first to introduce an important modification to the Aristotelian conception of experience was Francis Bacon. In his *Novum Organum,* Bacon merges the traditional meaning of experience (*experientia*) with the meaning of a closely related word, *experimentum.* In doing this, Bacon attempted to define experience not only as the possession of a particular kind of knowledge but, rather, as the *process*, through which this knowledge is acquired. Bacon distinguishes then between "mere experience" (*experientia vaga*) and "regulated experience" (*experientia ordinata*).[21] While the former is, as Bacon argues, "mere groping in the dark", regulated experience begins by "setting up a light, and then shows the road by it, commencing with a regulated and digested, not a misplaced and vague course of experiment." Regulated experiment then proceeds to "deducing axioms, and from those axioms new experiments." Regulated experience is, thus, observation directed by guiding principles. As is well known, the association of the notion of experience with that of experiment was central in the development of the "new science" developed in the seventeenth century. It is less noticed, though, that "experiments" were also conceived as "trials" in which matters of facts were established by the judgment of qualified "witnesses." Philosophers and scientists like

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[19] Aristotle, *Metaph*, A,980b-981a.

[20] See the article "Erfahrung" in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie,* (Joachim Ritter Ed.) Basel : Schwabe, 1971-.

[21] Bacon, *Novum Organum*, bk. 1 , LXXXII and C.

Mersenne often claimed credibility for the experiments they performed by noting that qualified witnesses have assisted them in the experiences.[22]

Against this tradition that more or less works according to the model of our wider notion of experience, Locke uses "experience" in the narrower sense in such a way that it becomes a synonym of "observation". In the *Essay*, he defines experience as "[o]ur observation employ'd either about *external, sensible Objects; or about the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves.*"[23] As is well known, the presupposition underlying Locke's conception of experience is that our understanding begins as an "empty cabinet" that is gradually filled in by the information provided by our senses. On this view, cognition starts with experience, in the sense that the latter provides the raw material for reason and knowledge. Hume's conception of experience is often, even typically, identified with Locke's and this, in my opinion, is the source of the interpretation of Hume as holding the view that experience is limited to private observation. Flew's reading of Hume is a good example of this tendency to identify Hume's notion of experience with Locke's.

Hume has certainly in mind the larger view of experience that was proper to the defenders of the "experimental method" which he undertook to apply to moral subjects.[24] The notion that experience is constituted by the practice of doing

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[22] Peter Dear, *Discipline & Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995) p. 133. The issue has also been discussed in Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[23] Locke, *Essay* 2.1.2

[24] The point is also noted by the editors of the Oxford Philosophical Texts edition of the *Treatise*. They point out that in "the early 18th c. experiments were not necessarily thought of as activities carried out in laboratories, or even as tests carried out in carefully controlled conditions. The terms *observation, experience*, and *experiment* where often used interchangeably. As a result Hume and his contemporaries may take

experiments before witnesses is not inconsistent with another, perhaps even more influential, source for Hume's use "experience". This use of "experience" comes, unsurprisingly, from the literature on history that, as I have shown, constituted an important background for understanding many of Hume's philosophical stances. In the humanist tradition, history was typically referred to as the "teacher of life," that is, as a rich source of moral and political examples playing an important role in the teaching of personal and political virtue. Another commonplace of the humanist approach to history was the claim that "history is philosophy teaching by example." The idea behind this commonplace is that history furnishes us with a vast repertoire of moral and political examples, and that this collection makes a comprehensive reflection on morals and politics possible. It was also supposed that in perusing these moral examples one could, in much the same manner as we draw lessons from our personal past deeds, acquire a more complete and nuanced moral experience. It was also supposed that this method was preferable to inculcating moral principles by precept.

This view of history and experience was clearly formulated by Bolingbroke, a notorious English historical pyrrhonist contemporary to Hume. In his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (written between 1735-38 and posthumously published in 1752),[25] Bolingbroke claims that instruction by precept has the disadvantage of relying too often on "abstract or general propositions", and either resting "on the authority of others" or requiring "a long deduction of reasoning." However,

> when examples are pointed out to us, there is a kind of appeal, with which we are flattered, made to our senses, as well as our understandings. The instruction comes then upon our own authority: we

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relatively simple observations of human behaviour (observing the concern of parents for their children, for example) to be experiments." See annotation to T Intro.8, p. 425.

[25] Henry St John Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, 2 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1752). I use the following modern edition: Lord Bolingbroke, *Historical Writings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

frame the precept after our own experience, and yield to fact when we resist speculation. But this is not the only advantage of instruction by example; for example appeals not to our understanding alone, but to our passions likewise. Example assuages these, or animates them; sets passion on the side of judgment, and makes the whole man of a piece; which is more than the strongest reasoning and the clearest demonstration can do [...].[26]

Reading history, in Bolingbroke's view, is to be seen not simply as a process of receiving information about morals or politics but, rather, as a practice in which the understanding as well as the passions are involved. The practice of re-enacting past deeds makes it possible for these deeds to become part of our personal experience. The re-enactment of historical deeds enables us to enlarge our experience in the sense that our whole character, and not only our reason, is tested and improved by this imaginary participation in complex moral situations. Experience, in this sense, involves more than accepting *facts* as reported by testimony; it involves also the learning of rules or *norms*. It is this kind of experience that is responsible for our acquiring the normative concepts that ground our practices of judging empirical, aesthetic and moral facts, and thus providing us with a better appreciation of the situations in which we will act. Historical experience includes at once observation, accepting testimony, and learning rules.

Hume discloses his adherence to this understanding of "experience" in *Of the Study of History*, an essay published in 1741 (but withdrawn, after 1757, from editions of the essays published during Hume's life). In this essay Hume writes that:

> history is not only a valuable part of knowledge, but opens the door to many other parts, and affords materials to most of the sciences. And indeed, if we consider the shortness of human life, and our limited knowledge, even of what passes in our own time, we must be sensible that we should be for ever children in understanding, were it not for this invention, which extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most

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[26] Bolingbroke, *Historical Writings*, p. 9.

distant nations; making them contribute as much to our improvement in wisdom, as if they had actually lain under our observation. A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century (E-SH 566-67).

This remark is all the more interesting for not being at all original. The idea that "without history one remains always a child" was a classical formula that could be found in many history books and in the *ars historicae* or rhetorical treatises on the art of writing history that were common from the Renaissance through the mid-seventeenth century.[27] The repetition of the formula in Hume's little essay on history reveals not only his acquaintance with this tradition, but also an intention to give a new philosophical density to this oft-repeated claim. The claim that history enables us to expand our experience appears to be a central tenet in Hume's understanding of human nature, for he sees our capacity to transcend personal and first-hand experience as a feature that differentiates human beings from other animals.[28]

Hume believed that animals are endowed with some form or degree of reason, for they can make basic causal inferences (he also believed that they can experience such basic passions as pride, humility, love or hatred and that they can communicate these passions by sympathy).[29] However, if reasoning is nothing but the capacity, derived from custom, to infer effects from causes and causes from effects, how can we account for the significant differences we find between the cognitive capacities of human beings and those of animals, and even between different human beings? How

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[27] See Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 189.

[28] James Moore advances a similar claim in his "The Social Background of Hume's Science of Human Nature," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), pp. 23-41.

[29] See T 1.3.16 and EHU 9 for the claim that animals are endowed with reason. In T 2.1.12 and 2.2.12 Hume claims also that they experience passions and communicate them by sympathy.

is it that two persons with roughly the same experience can display significantly different intellectual skills? In a footnote to the first *Enquiry*, section 9, a section dealing with the much debated issue of the reason of animals, Hume says that differences in ability between minds are to be accounted for by differences in:

1) Natural dispositions, such as a greater attention and memory.

2) The "extension" of the mind, that is, its ability to have a greater comprehension of "the whole system of objects, and to infer justly their consequences" (EHU 9.5 n. 20).

3) The influence of "[b]iasses from prejudice, passion, party, &c."

4) The extension of experience: "After we have acquired a confidence in human testimony, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another" (EHU 9.5 n. 20).

In fact, Hume shows himself willing to reduce the list to conditions 1) and 4), for the "extension of the mind" and the influence of prejudice are dependent on the degree to which our experience has been enlarged by our confidence in testimony. The point is put in even clearer terms in the essay, "Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature" (1741), where Hume compares again human nature with animals:

> On the one hand, we see a creature, whose thoughts are not limited by any narrow bounds, either of place or time; who carries his researches into the most distant regions of this globe, and beyond this globe, to the planets and heavenly bodies; looks backwards to consider the first origin, at least the history of human race; casts his eye forwards to see the influence of his actions upon posterity, and the judgments which will be formed of his character a thousand years hence; a creature, who traces causes and effects to a great length and intricacy; extracts general principles from particular appearances; improves upon his discoveries; corrects his mistakes; and makes his very errors profitable. On the other hand, we are presented with a creature the very reverse of this; limited in its observations and reasonings to a few sensible objects which surround it; without curiosity, without foresight; blindly conducted by instinct, and attaining, in a short time, its utmost perfection, beyond which it is never able to advance a single step (E-DM 82).

Neither reason nor the passions mark the specific difference between human beings and other animals. The human factor lies in the capacity to be concerned with a world that exceeds by far our immediate natural, sensed environment, a world that extends as far as history and foresight can reach and that is constantly reshaped by our inquiries and discoveries. Awareness of this world cannot result exclusively from direct observation and personal experience, but requires the "confidence in human testimony" necessary to enlarge experience. This expanded experience acquired in and through society and culture also enables us to perceive an immensely complex natural and moral world. Awareness of this complexity permits us in turn to be sagacious in explaining and establishing empirical facts, to have an enlightened sensibility in moral perception, and delicacy of taste regarding aesthetic objects.

It is thus somewhat surprising to see the success of the charge leveled against Hume by Campbell and Reid and maintained by many contemporary interpreters: the charge of failing to see that social experience is constitutive of personal experience and reasoning, and of supporting an individualistic conception of the evaluation of testimony and the autonomy of the knower. For Hume is clear that the social world in which human beings live creates an indissoluble interdependence from which not even personal thinking can be subtracted. Our own thinking carries always a reference to others:

> The mutual dependence of men is so great, in all societies, that scarce any human action is entirely compleat in itself, or is performed without some reference to the actions of others, which are requisite to make it answer fully the intention of the agent [...] In short, this experimental inference and reasoning concerning the actions of others enters so much into human life, that no man, while awake, is ever a moment without employing it (EHU 8.17).

At this point it is necessary to consider an objection that can be raised against the reading of Hume on experience that I am proposing. The objection comes from David Norton's early paper on Hume and history and concerns a letter Hume wrote to Hugh

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Blair that has *prima facie* the appearance of confirming the thesis that by "experience" Hume can only mean "personal experience."[30] The letter, written in 1761, is all the more important for being indirectly addressed to Blair's friend George Campbell who, via Blair, had sent to Hume a manuscript copy of the yet unpublished *Dissertation on Miracles*.[31] The letter contains, in particular, an answer to Campbell's criticism of Hume's confusing use of "experience." In the *Dissertation*, Campbell charges Hume with confusing a private and a public conception of experience in "Of Miracles" (*EHU* 10).[32] Specifically, the criticism is that when Hume says that testimony is to be tested against experience, an interpretation of experience as public would render the argument circular, since public experience is constituted by testimony and an interpretation of experience as private would render the argument ridiculous, since we should be obliged to give up those countless beliefs that we cannot check against our personal memory and observation. In response, Hume wrote:

> (1)No man can have any other experience but his own. (2)The experience of others becomes his only by the credit which he gives to their testimony; (3)which proceeds from his own experience of human nature (HL 1:349 numbers added).

Given that this is supposed to be an answer to Campbell, who claims that either of the interpretations of "experience" (social or private) makes Hume's position highly problematic, to assume that Hume simply replies by saying that he believes experience is private entails assuming that he did not understand the criticism. For then his answer would be open to the same objection. In contrast, I suggest that Hume is here merely defending himself from the charge of talking nonsense about

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[30] David Fate Norton, "History and Philosophy in Hume's Thought," in *David Hume: Philosophical Historian*, ed. David Fate Norton & Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1965), , p. xlvi.

[31] Hume also possessed a copy of the 1762 edition of the *Dissertation* in which he wrote some manuscript marginal notes. See David Fate and Mary J. Norton, *The David Hume Library* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1996), p. 80.

[32] See my discussion of Campbell's argument in chapter 2.

experience. His point is (1) that it would be ridiculous to take him as claiming that one person can have someone else's experience. However, he claims, (2) the experience of others can be made one's own via testimony ("the experience of others becomes his"). The experience of others can be internalized because (3) the inferences implicit in our belief in testimony are the same as the ones implicit in the formation of any other "strictly personal" (if there is such thing) belief.

It may be argued that I am reading my own views into (3). But consider what Hume says in the preceding paragraph: "I would desire the author [i.e. Campbell] to consider, whether the medium by which we reason concerning human testimony be different from that which leads us to draw any inferences concerning human actions; that is, our knowledge of human nature from experience?" (HL 1:349). And if Campbell should insist that Hume's answer does not address his most important argument in the *Dissertation*, namely, that children first believe blindly in testimony (e.g. education) and only later acquire the experience necessary to have a critical eye regarding the testimony of others, Hume could simply answer that this "objection" misses the point of his claims about testimony and experience:

> As to the youthful propensity to believe, which is corrected by experience; it seems obvious, that children adopt blindfold all the opinions, principles, sentiments, and passions, of their elders, as well as credit their testimony; nor is it more strange, than that a hammer should make an impression on clay (HL 1: 349).

Hume argues that it falls on an individual judger of facts to determine, either by reflexive or reflective reasoning,[33] the credibility or legitimate weight of any given testimony. The individual can either be blindly credulous or, having enlarged his personal experience, can have the required sagacity to pronounce a more nuanced verdict. Hence, accepting that social experience is constitutive of one's own

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[33] For the distinction between reflexive and reflective reasoning see my discussion of it in chapter 2.

perception does not entail denying this experience is personal or that we have to give up personal autonomy and rely exclusively on authority.[34] On the contrary, Hume's point is that it is only by enlarging one's experience with the testimony of others that one can perfect one's own perceptual/conceptual skills in order to depart from prejudice and immediate intuitions and attain an autonomous and mature point of view of the world. The process of enlarging one's experience remains, of course, personal in the sense that it results from the individual's own interaction with the world. Autonomy is not a cognitive starting point but, rather, the result of acquiring a wider and richer social and historical experience, something that occurs in our personal interactions with society by means of our peculiar education and our progressively informed personal point of view.

But, as Hume says in "Of the Study of History," there is "also an advantage in that experience which is acquired by history, above what is learned by the practice of the world, that it brings us acquainted with human affairs, without diminishing in the least from the most delicate sentiment of virtue." Hume shares in this sense the opinion, expressed by such historical pyrrhonists as La Mothe le Vayer and Bayle, that historians come closest to an objective and unbiased point of view. If no better or truer standard can be found for assessing knowledge claims in the moral and empirical worlds than that given in socially established practices of validating beliefs, then a point of view is to be sought that, while remaining an interested (remains, that is a human point of view), does not confine itself to personal, partisan or national interests. The historian who writes not merely for his contemporaries, but who also submits his accounts to the judgment of future generations, places himself in that historical

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[34] Don Garrett adopts a similar solution for the puzzle of "experience" in Hume's argument on miracles: " The probability of any given kind of testimony is ultimately dependent on the judger's own experience, but once that experience has validated a kind of testimony, the experience of others -- when it is the object of that kind of testimony -- can then function cognitively very much as if it were one's own." Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, p. 151.

standpoint that constitutes the standard of objectivity that Hume is trying to define, and that he prefers even to the point of view of philosophy:

> When a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest, than as they stand in themselves; and has his judgment warped on every occasion by the violence of his passion. When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue. History keeps in a just medium betwixt these extremes, and places the objects in their true point of view. The writers of history, as well as the readers, are sufficiently interested in the characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise; and, at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment (E-SH 567-68).

Historical experience is thus a more complete experience in that it not only constitutes 1) a way of acquiring knowledge of facts, and thus of enlarging the world that is open to our perception, but also makes possible 2), our acquiring knowledge of rules, that is, of moral, epistemic and aesthetic norms as they emerge from and are legitimated by our reflection on past social practices. Both 1) and 2) make it possible for historical experience to become also 3), a way of acquiring an objective point of view. For our extended knowledge of facts conjoined with our learning of rules, including those that enable us to judge on facts, enable the historical point of view to become analogous to that of a judge who pronounces his verdicts by appealing to the jurisprudence that emerges from a reflection on past practices of judging. The historical perspective of this judge thus makes it possible for him to depart from his own personal interests and biases and embrace the point of view of humanity.

4.4 The science of human nature

A statement of preference for the historical perspective over that of the philosopher or that of the active individual puts us in the midst of one of the central questions Hume

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deals with in the *Treatise*: How is it that philosophy, an enterprise concerned with objects distant from everyday life and that pursues cold and intricate reasonings, remains nevertheless an interesting and worthwhile occupation? This question haunted Hume at the end of the first book of the *Treatise*, where he famously struggles to surmount the "spleen and indolence" to which the skepticism resulting from his investigation of traditional metaphysical topics had led him (T 1.4.7.11). Hume's metaphysical queries led him to conclude that such central metaphysical concepts as necessity, identity, and the external world, concepts without which one cannot even begin to think or have a coherent everyday discourse, are nothing but "illusions of the imagination." Moreover, reason itself, he concluded, is nothing but a transition between ideas, a transfer of attention for which the imagination is responsible. We face, Hume contends, a "very dangerous dilemma". For if everything is a product of the imagination, of the fancy, then we will have to yield to its every suggestion, and this will lead us to incoherent, obscure and absurd opinions. Or, must we pretend that reason is separable from the imagination and utterly reject the suggestions of the latter? This alternative is for Hume no less dangerous. For the understanding, when it "acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life". We have, he says, "no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all" (T 1.4.4.6-7).

As a therapy that will allow him to escape from the splenetic state into which his philosophical enquiries had plunged him, Hume at this point turns to nature or, to be more specific, to our social nature. He maintains that nature alone "cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (T 1.4.7.9). In sum, Hume proposes a return to an

active and social life as a counterweight to the despair and confusion generated by his pursuit of metaphysical questions. Returning to friends, amusements and even to backgammon is a way of touching, interacting, and enjoying the very world of which we are in doubt when in the philosophical cabinet.

Metaphysical questions, however, do have a natural appeal. At least some of us cannot, he says, repress our curiosity about the underlying principles of human action and of morals and politics. This curiosity arises precisely in social interaction and conversation as they constantly confront us with the need to judge and act. It is only *natural*, Hume contends, to inquire into the principles directing our actions and judgments, and this natural impulse puts us once again on the path of philosophy. "I am uneasy", he says, "to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falshood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed" (T 1.4.7.12). When the philosopher thinks of herself not as an abstract metaphysician, but as a practical person inherently involved in social interactions, philosophical questions become natural and, to a significant degree, practical questions. Having seen the connection between philosophical questions and practical life, the prospect of abandoning these questions and consecrating himself to backgammon or, as Hume puts it, "to any other business and diversion" is not at all tempting: "I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy" (T 1.4.7.12). Spleen and the feeling of having cut oneself off from the practical world of everyday life is the result of *perceiving* philosophy as a detached and abstract, as a merely rational, means of comprehending the world. Philosophy so perceived cannot be motivating. But one can correct this perception. One does so by showing that the proper object of philosophy is not properly limited to the abstract world of traditional metaphysics, but includes as an essential component the concrete social world of merchants, scientists, lawyers and artisans, of those who in multiple ways are constantly engaged and committed to that world by judging and acting. Moreover, perceiving the world as an essentially human world entails perceiving the *nature* of

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this world as one that is constituted by society and culture. *Perceiving* this world as a world that includes society, culture, and even backgammon succeeds in *engaging* us to look for clearer perceptions of the principles that govern our everyday concerns.

If seeing the connection between philosophical questions and practical life offers a solution to the "melancholy and delirium" provoked by abstract metaphysics, and also furnishes us with a motivation for doing philosophy, nonetheless the fundamental reason for pursuing philosophical questions lies in the fact that, were it not for philosophy, the treatment of these questions crucial to our social life would be left entirely to "superstition". By "superstition" Hume means, if not all religion, at least the religious bigotry that was widespread in early modern Europe. If questions about the foundation of the world, now understood as being eminently a social world, are irrepressible questions, then it is essential to decide the best way of approaching them: "[s]ince therefore 'tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action, we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable". In this sense Hume has no hesitation in recommending philosophy, even philosophy in its typically abstruse and imperfect state, for "[g]enerally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous" (T 1.4.7.13).

One can only wonder how it has happened that so many interpreters of Hume have supposed, for such a long time, that Hume was almost exclusively concerned with questions of epistemology, science, or even of conceptual analysis. As recent literature on him increasingly shows, Hume's central claim is that philosophical questions are only worth pursuing when they are considered from the point of view of social human beings. We also now see why the practice of reading only the first book of the

Treatise and the first *Enquiry* is so damaging.[35] For much is gained in considering Hume's epistemology from the point of view that he elaborates in the rest of the *Treatise,* in the second *Enquiry,* in the *Essays*, and in the *History.* The unity of Hume's thinking is to be sought precisely in his multiple and not always perfectly consistent attempts to capture what is philosophically central and intriguing in the many and diverse *practices* that engage us socially. This philosophical enterprise can only be revealed to the reader of Hume once due attention is paid to his constant reflections on human practices as these are often expressed in the *Essays*; in his *History of England,* and in his writings on religion, especially "Of Miracles," the *Natural History of Religion*, and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion.*

This wide-ranging philosophical activity is exactly what Hume, in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, points to as the proper method for establishing a science of man: "We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of

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[35]One can only mention some of the important contributions to this much wider understanding of Hume. Interpretations of the *Treatise* that emphasize the importance of Hume's concerns with morals and practical life are : Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*; David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician.* Collections of essays that reflect this wider reading of Hume are James T. King and Donald W. Livingston, ed. *Hume: A Re-evaluation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), Donald W. Livingston and Marie Martin, ed. *Hume as Philosopher of Society, Politics, and History* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1991); David Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Besides Livingston's book there are a number of works that attempt to articulate Hume's philosophical and historical concerns, notably Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* and Spencer K. Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History: Historical Theory and Practice* (Lanhan: University Press of America, 2000). Also noteworthy are the contributions of historians and some philosophers to an improved understanding of the *History of England,* particularly, Nicholas Capaldi and Donald W. Livingston, ed. *Liberty in Hume's History of England* (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1990); Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740-1820*; and N. T. Phillipson, *Hume* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989).

human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (T Intro. 10). It is, Hume believes, in collecting experiments in this manner that a science of human nature, capable of challenging "superstition" as our guide in our dealings with the world, can be established. This science, he says, "will be not inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension" (T Intro. 10). The superiority of the science of human nature, as Hume projects it, comes from the fact that it deals with traditional questions of philosophy from a point of view that is no longer philosophical in the traditional sense. It takes, rather, the historical point of view that he articulates and praises in the essay "Of the Study of History," a point of view that avoids both the abstract objectivity of cold and abstruse philosophy and the warm pursuit of self-interest that typically characterizes individuals engaged in practical life: "History keeps in a just medium betwixt these extremes, and places the objects in their true point of view" (E-SH 568). Taking this point of view makes it possible for us to find, in a single science of human nature, the systematic unity of the most practical and the most abstract human cognitive enterprises:

> 'Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judg'd of by their powers and faculties (T Intro. 4).

These sciences have in common the fact that, in a variety of important ways, they relate to human beings, to those animals which live in a social as well as a natural environment and who, not even when they embark on the most abstract mathematical reasonings are able to depart from their sentiments and practical interests – to animals that not only act and judge, but who are also able to enlarge their experience and thereby correct the perceptions out of which they act and judge. The science of man "is the only solid foundation for the other sciences", for all these sciences result from

the application of human powers, while "the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation" (T Intro. 7). The science of man studies the way we think, the way we feel and act, and the way we behave in society, and it discovers the principles that regulate these activities by reflection on past practices. Hume's science of human nature conceives the establishment of those regulative principles that explain how it is that we judge things to be the case, to be good or evil, beautiful or ugly, true or false, neither by reference to *a priori* principles nor to personal interests, but by reference to those established practices that constitute the implicit "jurisprudence" for judging. Just as a standard of taste can be found by reflecting on our past practice of judging aesthetic objects, so can standards of objectivity, truth, and morals be found by reflection on previous experience of other kinds. Such reflection never yields a definitive result, for past practices, like jurisprudence, can be changed or improved, so that in enlarging our knowledge of facts we sometimes modify our previous understanding of these standards. But, to the extent that these standards or normative concepts are established from the historical point of view, they are objectively valid and reliable, for they are not based solely on our own practices and interests, but take into consideration the practices and interest of past generations, of distant cultures, and of future generations. The historical point of view results from a compromise between the perspective of past generations, the living, and those yet to come, and constitutes the most objective point of view that human beings can attain without transcending the sphere of experience, which, of course, they cannot do.

So considered, it is clear that Hume's science of man offers much more than a merely skeptical "deconstruction" of traditional metaphysics. By incorporating public and historical experience into the very gaze of the philosopher, Hume provides an account of how it is that we gain such normative concepts as necessity, identity, good, or beauty, and how it is that in using them we can refer to objective features of the world. Given this fact, it cannot be said, as it has often been said, that Hume's criticism of traditional metaphysics merely prepared the field for Kant's philosophy. For Hume's

science of human nature not only provides an account of how is it that we possess and use these normative concepts, but it also provides an account that constitutes a philosophically interesting *alternative* to Kant's contributions to the same issues, an alternative in which these regulative concepts can be said to be both *a posteriori*, a reflection of historical experience, and *a priori*, a condition of the possibility of thinking and doing. The reference of concepts to an experience containing a recollection of social and historical practices and facts is something that Hume, perhaps surprisingly, shares with two philosophers, Vico and Hegel, who are often thought to have nothing in common with Hume.

Conclusion

Hume, it emerges from these pages, is not the defender of an individualistic epistemology that cuts philosophy off from the various philosophical preoccupations elicited in practical life. On the contrary, Hume appears as a philosopher deeply concerned with the challenges of social life in ways that have led him to introduce substantive modifications to the previous philosophies he most relied on, particularly to that of Locke. His theory of perceptions harbors a view of concepts that seeks to make room precisely for what has been left out by Descartes or Locke, earlier proponents of the "way of ideas." It seeks to make room, that is, for an account of our public use of concepts and for our ability to refine our conceptual repertoire by referring it to the larger context of experience that I have characterized as historical.

Hume appears too as reflecting on key aspects of his philosophy against a background of discussions on the status of historical knowledge, by historical pyrrhonists. A background in which, contrary to our common representation of early-modern philosophy as an exclusive battle between "empiricists" and "rationalists", philosophers as well as historians looked for an account of knowledge that avoids the siren's song of rational insight without remaining tied to the mast of private perception. Insofar as Hume adopts this perspective, he does not represent human nature as resulting from a self-regulation achieved by rational control, nor is he committed, as the naturalist reading of Hume maintains, to claiming that human nature is entirely controlled by the merciless dictates of nature. If Hume is to be seen as a commonsensical philosopher it is not because he shared the tenets of the Scottish school. It is because he has an unpretentious view of human nature as resulting from the tension between certain natural dispositions, including dispositions to believe and to think, and the limited, autonomous control that human beings can exert over their spontaneous responses to their environment. Correcting nature results not, in Hume's view, from stirring up the clouds in search of Rationality, but from drawing on the

teachings of experience, understood in the larger sense advanced in this thesis. Likewise, if Hume is to be understood as a naturalist, it is not because he thinks that human nature is entirely subordinated to the dictates of Nature, but because he thinks human nature is *human* nature, namely the nature of an animal that is inherently embedded in culture and society, and whose responses reflect an ability to evolve in the higher-level environment that human beings have painstakingly brought about by means of their long history.

I have presented here what is, I submit, a plausible reading of Hume as making his science of human nature depend on a philosophical reflection on history. There are a number of tasks, however, that remain to be done in order to foster and enrich the reading I am proposing. The first of these is to unpack a thesis that is only implicit or barely treated in this thesis, namely, that Hume was a philosopher of history. I believe that I have sufficiently shown the extent to which Hume relied on discussions of historical knowledge. I have shown the importance of history for his philosophical project. Some contemporaries of Hume were not only aware of the implications of Hume's philosophy for the early developments of philosophy of history, but also saw him as one of the founders of "philosophical history", or history written from a philosophical perspective. Voltaire, for instance, not only found Hume's *History*, "the best, perhaps that was ever written in any language", but he also thought that Hume's work shows to the public that "that the task of writing history belongs to philosophers."[1]

Hume was also given an important role in the genesis of "conjectural history", a genre that flourished in France and Germany as well as Scotland, and that was characterized by the attempt to give an account of universal history by providing a naturalistic explanation of the passage of humanity from one stage of development to

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[1] Voltaire, *Oeuvres De Voltaire*, M. Beuchot ed. (Paris: Firmin Didot frères , Lequien fils, 1829-), 41.5: 451.

another. The expression "conjectural history" was coined by Dugald Stewart, who thought that this kind of genetic account of human nature should be termed "*Theoretical or Conjectural History*; an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of *Natural History*, as employed by Mr Hume, and with what some French writers have called *Histoire Raisonnée*."[2] Thus, it is important to understand the sense in which conjectural history is tributary of the method Hume sketched in his *Natural History of Religion*.

There is also good reason to believe that my new perspective on Hume's relationship to historical pyrrhonism provides in turn a new perspective for revisiting the question of his influence on the German *Aufklärung* and Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Once we abandon the view that Hume merely sets the problems that Kant is to solve, it is also possible to inquire into the extent to which historical pyrrhonism was also influential in the work of philosophers such as Crusius, Mendelsohn, and Kant. In some of their works these authors discuss most of the arguments of historical pyrrhonism, although, again, this has attracted little attention in contemporary scholarship. I have also suggested, rather than argued, that Hume's philosophy may have more in common with Hegel than it is usually thought to have because they share, in my opinion, a similar understanding of what experience is and a common refusal to take the shortcuts of rationalism, transcendental philosophy, or providential naturalism in order to ground their philosophical project. In due course I hope to turn this suggestion into a study that explores the influence of both historical pyrrhonism and Hume on German philosophy of the *Aufklärung*.

For the present, however, I must be content, first, with the claim that I have shown what I set out to show, namely,

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[2] Dugald Stewart, *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart* (Edinburgh: Gregg, 1854) vol. 10, p. 34.

1) That historical pyrrhonism constitutes an interesting alternative to the eighteenth-century debates on the foundations of empirical knowledge in that it presents facts not as something passively received by rational insight or sense perception, but as something actively *established* through the application of rules for the validation of testimony.

2) That the debates on historical knowledge engender the idea that objectivity need not result from our attaining the point of view from nowhere (the perspective of the ideal observer) or from reliance on the dictates of nature, but that we can attain an objective point of view *within* and *as a result of our reflection on* the practices of judgment adopted by human beings in the course of their history.

3) That Hume's philosophy is consistent with the legal-historical approach adopted by some historical pyrrhonists.

4) That Hume does not hold exclude testimony as a reliable resource for belief-formation but, rather, gives to the account of belief generated via testimony -- historical belief in particular-- a central place in his theory of belief.

5) That Hume's approach to explanation is modeled after the examples provided by the practice of informal reasoning and explanation proper to lawyers and historians, and not after the formal covering-law method with which he is credited by the standard reading.

6) That Hume's theory of impressions and ideas qualifies as a theory of concepts because it can account for the public use and reference of concepts.

7) That this Humean theory of concepts interestingly identifies perception and conception, preempting thus the charge of psychologism that has been often leveled against him.

8) That Hume's theory of concepts is thus consistent with a wider notion of experience, one that includes the experience of others as this is transmitted by testimony and history.

9) That his project of a science of human nature reflects Hume's commitment to referring all knowledge to experience in the wider sense discussed in this thesis.

And, secondly, with the suggestion that what I have achieved is not only important in its own right, as giving us the foundation for a new and improved appreciation of Hume's philosophical genius, but for pointing the way to the further study I have mentioned, and with showing, eventually, that Hume was not only a philosopher and a historian, but also a philosopher of history.

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