

## David Hume, Scepticism, Imagination and Political Philosophy

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### Initial remark

The main purpose of my presentation is to explore some possible links between Hume's philosophy of history and imagination. My point is that although Hume has clearly rejected narratives about human history and politics based on modern and rationalist versions of Natural Law, his own accounts on the matter were positively based on arguments that went well beyond some sort of retreat into bare empiricism or scattered historicism. Hume's stance on the matter of history and politics, to my mind, can be interpreted as an effort to build a **natural history of morals, justice and government** in which imagination plays a non-negligible role. His criticism of rationalistic natural law theories does not entail the acceptance of empiricist or institutionalist points of view. Of course, empiricist and institutionalist languages are in the use, across Hume's arrays of arguments, but it seems to me that these languages appear as submitted to the supremacy of imagination. In that sense, we may face in Hume's theory of justice an alternative view, in the form of a breach between pure rationalistic and empiricist views.

That sort of "third way" may have some empirical implications, since the affirmation of imagination, as a strong source for human accomplishments, requires the recognition and further investigation of its effects on history. Indeed, in a great measure, history itself can be taken as a proof field for human imagination.

Being an experimentalist, Hume's narratives about politics and history could not refuse the adoption of a third person perspective: historical knowledge is not possible if human accomplishments were not described and taken in account. "Cautious observation of human life" can be assumed as the motto of that intellectual program. But, in addition to that "third person perspective", I would like to argue for the presence of a concomitant presence of a "first person" outlook. In other terms, the overall picture of a natural process of historical accomplishments is accompanied by a theory of human agency in which men, although affected by customs and circumstances, are also driven by the force of imagination.

I would like to start by presenting the main tenets of what I suggest to term as Hume's *philosophy of the emergence of order* or, in other words, his principles of first philosophy applied to ontological matters. I will detach these principles from Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. After that, I will consider some of Hume's accounts on the theme of imagination. In a first move, I will isolate his theory of imagination, as presented in Books I and III, of the *Treatise*; subsequently I will refer to an application of the theory, in Book III, in Hume's treatment of the origins of property and justice. To conclude, I will suggest that some of the main features of imagination, as posed by Hume, can be taken as a useful clue for the understanding of political

philosophy itself.

### **Hume's ontological argument: the anti-DA argument**

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, besides religion in itself, deals with a major philosophical issue: the question of the *emergence of order*. The core of Hume's argument about that issue can be found elsewhere – in the X and XI sections of the first *Enquire*. Nevertheless, it is undeniable the specific force of the *Dialogues* in addressing arguments that have been sat before by Hume himself.

*Order* and *design* were images associated, in XVIII<sup>th</sup> century intellectual debate, with religious quarrels. Despite the undeniable fact that Hume has considered these themes in a text devoted to religion, he can be accounted as one of *the main responsible for their secularization*. If Carl Schmitt – in his *Political Theology* - has pointed out that the main concepts of political philosophy are secularized theological notions, Hume can be said to be the responsible for the enactment of a similar effect of secularization upon cosmological categories, deeply embedded in theological predicaments.

Be that as it may, if we take some of the arguments of Philo, the character of the *Dialogues* that has been largely identified with Hume's positions, respecting the supposition of a "blind nature" and of a natural process entirely devoid of original purposes and without foreseeable conclusion, we may find a strong plea against design arguments about the emergence of order.

The Design Argument, considered by Hume as "the chief or sole argument for a divine existence" (EHU II, 135), may be decomposed in three statements

. From the first *Enquiry* (EHU II, 135): Universe as a "display of intelligence" that cannot be attributed to randomness, or to "the fortuitous concourse of atoms"; chance could not "produce what the great genius can never suffice admire". Gaskin has named this argument as a Nomological Argument (GASKIN, 1993: 323).

. From the *Dialogues* (DNR 2, 143): "The adaptation of means to ends, trough all nature, resembles exactly, though it must exceeds, the production of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence". Such an argument is based on analogy: "the Author of nature is similar to the mind of man". Gaskin has named this argument as a Teleological Argument (GASKIN, 1993: 323).

.From the *Dialogues* (DNR 3, 154): "Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation". We may name this argument as a Perceptual Argument.

It's worth considering Philo's objection to DA argument:

...the subject you are engaged exceeds all human reason and enquiry. Can you pretend to show any such similarity between the fabric of a house, and the generation of a universe? Have you ever seen nature in any such situation as

resembles the first arrangements of the elements? Have worlds ever been formed under your eye? and have you had leisure to observe the whole progress of the phenomenon, from the first appearance of order to its final consummation? If you have, then cite your experience, and deliver your theory (HUME: 1992, 212).

Besides theological dimension involved, Philo's argument addressed to a broad subject that can be considered as *independent of religious concerns*. That "broad subject" is the question of *the emergence of order in unintentional settings*. An unintentional setting is one marked by the absence of design and, as a consequence, of purpose, in its operation. Despite its development and presentation in a text explicitly devoted to religious issues, the anti-DA has a strong presence in Hume's representation of several mundane issues: origin of government, property, history and justice, just to mention a brief list.

The Dialogues is not a piece of theology, but of philosophy, and its main target, through the enactment of a religious quarrel, is the place of design and order in nature and human life. The idea of a "blind nature" is a strong and radical image of a universe driven by processes that cannot be attributed to any design. Different from the Epicurean and atomistic hypothesis, there is, according Hume, order in the universe, but a kind of endogenous order, derived from its very operations and not derived from external forces or design. Blindness also means that nature doesn't act following moral purposes and, accordingly, the question of the immanent presence of goodness appears as nonsensical. In that sense, we do have order, not chaos, and this is a sound reason not to accept miracles as possible occurrences in the course of the world.

Secularization, in the terms I have posed before, means a disassociation between order and design. While the cosmological idea of order now appears as associated with the metaphor of a blind nature, design is admitted only in processes affected by human *téchne*, by purposeful human action. The utility of the anti-DA argument lays on the recognition that history and society do not emerge from human purposeful actions. That sensibility is not Humean monopoly. We may find among some of Hume's best friends similar inclinations concerning the interpretation of history and social dynamics. This is the case of Adam Ferguson and his strong proposition about history and society as a result of human action, but not of human design. It's not Providence who drives such processes, but unpredictability and unintended consequences.

### **Aspects of imagination**

I would like to add to this general picture of the emergence of order, as marked by unintended consequences and expedience, the first person perspective. If it is detectable in Hume's best intellectual endeavours the project of what can be oddly posed as a "Natural History of Human Accomplishments", there is also a Natural History of its agents. In such an effort, imagination seems to plays, to put it mildly, a sizable role.

Let's turn our attention to some of Hume's main attributed features of imagination, as stated in the Book I of the *Treatise*:

#### 1. Imagination as opposed to memory:

In his first account on the issue, in the *Treatise*, Hume establishes a distinction between imagination and memory. Accordingly, memory occurs when the original impression,

turned an idea in the mind, “retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity” (Hume, 1978: 8). In that sense, memory is “somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea” (Idem). On the contrary, imagination occurs in the case of a “perfect idea”. That beautiful image – “a perfect idea” – points to an impression that “entirely loses that (first) vivacity”. In other words, imagination may be conceived as an idea *without any correspondent and detectable original impression*.

As a result of the comparison, we find this proposition: “’Tis evident at a first sight, that the ideas of memory are much lively and strong than of imagination” (Hume, 1978: 8). In the case of imagination, “the perception is faint and languid, and cannot without difficulty be preserved by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time” (Hume, 1978: 9).

Though neither the ideas of the memory nor imagination “can make their appearance in the mind, unless their correspondent impressions have gone before to prepare the way for them, (...) imagination is not restrained to the same order and form with the original impressions” (Hume, 1978: 9). In a further piece of the text, Hume asserts the “liberty of imagination to transpose and change its ideas” (Hume, 1978: 10).

## 2. Change of positions between memory and imagination:

In Book III, Part III, sec. 5 of the *Treatise*, we may find a singular combination of attributes between the ideas of memory and imagination:

As an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity, may degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for an idea of the imagination; so on the other hand an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgement (Hume, 1987: 86).

Hume gives us two interesting examples to fix that combination of attributes. The first one is the liar example: “by the frequent repetition of their lies, (they) come at last to believe and to remember them as realities”. The second example considers habits and customs: have “some influence on the mind as nature, and infixing the idea with equal force and vigour” (Hume, 1978: 86). Both examples put forward a common operation of imagination: repetition – by fraud or by custom/habit, it doesn’t matter here the difference, acts as a fixing mechanism and, by doing that, give to imagination the attributes of a basic and tectonic force in the making of experience.

The consideration of habit and custom deserves, in that measure, some attention. Through their specific devices – fixing ideas with “force and vigour” -, habits and customs act as attaching mechanisms, in the sense that they turn imagination livelier. As Hume has suggested in another comment, “all reasoning are not but the effect of custom”, and “custom have no influence, but in inlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any subject” (Hume, 1978: 149). It seems that the lack of clear impressions as an original condition for imagination is compensated through the operations of habit and custom. They give force and concreteness to something that lacks an original foundation on impressions, due to their faculty to give us “a strong conception of **any subject** (e.a.)”.

To sum up that point, the inherent attributes of imagination are empowered by the forced of custom. To make clear his statement about the attributes of imagination, Hume mobilizes, in another moment of his Treatise, the liar analogy: “As liars, by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to remember them; so the judgement, or rather the imagination, by the like means, may have ideas so strongly imprinted on it, and conceive them in so full a light, that they may operate upon the mind in the same manner with those, which the senses, memory or reason present to us” (Hume, 1978: 117).

### 3. Imagination, past and present:

According to Hume, imagination is also a driven force in our ordinary “transferences of the past to the future”:

Our past experiences present no determinate object; and as our belief, however faint, fixes itself on a determinate object, ‘tis evident that the belief arises not merely from the transference of past to future, but from some operation of the fancy conjoin’d with it (Hume, 1978: 140).

The quotation reveals a clear angle to access the links between imagination and habit/custom. If we take habit and custom as permanent projections of the past on the future, these operations of the “fancy” seems to be of crucial relevance, to say the least. Actually they appear as necessary conditions for the very operations of habit. In that sense, the ordinary sense of time seems to be dependent on the faculties of imagination.

### 4. Imagination and the enlargement of sympathy:

Another trait of imagination – of the great importance for morals – is its connections with sympathy. For Hume, the enlargement of sympathy is based on operations of imagination:

...that sympathy is not always limited to the present moment, (...) we often feel by communication the pains and pleasures of others, which are not in being, and which we have only anticipate by the force of imagination (Hume, 1978: 385).

## **Some general attributes of imagination**

Perfect Idea

Faint and languid perception

Imagination not restrained by original impressions

Associated with habits and customs

Enlargement effects upon sympathy

Principle of restlessness: cannot be preserved by the mind for any considerable time; in that sense, it looks for fixation outside the mind.

## Imagination, property, and justice

Being an epistemic dimension of human nature, imagination cannot be but a major and driven force in human accomplishments. In this brief section I will allude to two of these accomplishments: property and justice.

Imagination seems to occupy a privileged role in the making of one of the most important of human institutions: property. As has been clearly stated by Duncan Forbes, imagination plays a crucial role – “through the regular activity of the association of ideas” – in defining “the main rules of natural jurisprudence as to the allocation of goods” (FORBES, 1975: 9-10). According to Hume, “these rules are principally fixed by the imagination” (HUME, 1987: 504n). Imagination is what makes possible that, from the observation of regular possession, the idea – and the institution – of property become possible. The most intriguing aspect of that passage is the fact that it relies on a frailty of human nature, elegantly noted by Duncan Forbes under the following terms: “the tendency to generalize beyond the fragmentary and discontinuous evidence provided by the senses, to close the gaps in experience” (FORBES, 1975: 10).

The textual support for that interpretation deserves quotation:

...the mind has a natural propensity to join relations, especially resembling ones, and finds a kind of fitness and uniformity in such a union. From this propensity are derived these laws of nature, *that upon the first formation of society, property always follows the present possession; and afterwards, that it arises from first or from long possession* (Hume, 1978: 509).

This inclination, as Hume admits, is so strong as often to make humans run into errors, just to complete the association: “...we can feign a new relation and even an absurd one, in order to complete the union” (Hume, 1987: 504n). The union of these objects is not an empirical matter. At that point, Hume has in mind “objects that have already a union in the fancy... (Hume, 1978: 504n). This is an illustration of a general Humean tenet about causality. Causality as an idea and, as an ordinary operation of the mind, is based on a clear transfiguration, according to which from the observation of a constant conjunction of object, this association acquires a “union in the imagination” (Hume, 1978: 93).

Public interest and justice:

Frederic Brahami employs, in his book about Hume’s *Treatise*, the expression “invention of public interest” in his comment about the Book III. (BRAHAMI, 2003: 225). To my mind, the expression is quite accurate for the treatment of the theme of justice. The theme of justice, as considered by Hume in the *Treatise* and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Enquiry*, is prior to the reflection about specific political institutions. To put it in a more precise way, justice appears in Hume the main institution of human society, as it works through regular, public and predictable manners. In that sense, justice requires, for its inventions and fixation, the works of imagination, a faculty that is able to produce impressions (the more vivid and direct of human affections).

As Hume stated in Book III of the *Treatise*, selfishness and scarcity must be considered as components for the human drive for justice and civil order. Put in this way, it’s

possible to detect some Hobbesian accent in the statement. But the impression of affinity vanishes as we add to the picture one of the Humean central arguments: more than selfishness and scarcity, “confined generosity” seems to be strongest move for justice. A very special kind of motive, it must be added. “Generosity”, as a natural virtue, is a necessary condition for justice. At the same time, its intrinsic frailty and its unpredictable incidence on human affairs request the establishment of artificial and predictable rules of justice. In spite of the presence of selfishness and private interests in human behaviour, the type of interest that leads to justice is a special one. Hume denies that “the interest, which gave rise to them (i. e., the rules of justice) ... (are) of a kind that could be pursued by the natural and inartificial passions of men” (HUME, 1987: 497). Being derived from human interests, justice establishes with these original motives a connection “somewhat similar”. As Hume poses:

But however single acts of justice may be contrary, either to public or private interests, 'tis certain, that the **whole plan or scheme** (emphasis added) is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well being of every individual (HUME, 1987: 497).

The invention of the public interest is the process by which the “whole plan and scheme” become a necessary condition for sociability. A process not invented by rational designers, of course, but, on the other hand, an accomplishment that cannot be attributed to erratic and individual search for private interest maximization. From the necessity of protection of a private interest doesn't follow the acceptance of a “whole plan and scheme of justice”. There is a gap between these poles. Imagination makes them bridgeable.

According to Hume, the passing towards the abstract and the generic stems from imagination, since we don't have the experience or the impression of something similar. In that sense, the works of imagination can be perceived as some sort of hallucinatory leap, in the sense posed by Fernando Gil, for whom hallucination means an “excess of meaning attribution”.

Moreover, Hume seems to have introduced a peculiar variant of sceptical anthropology in which man, more than “l'animal qui crôit” - as posed by Montaigne -, is an *imaginative being*. He is not a belief bearer, but an image-maker. Being necessary for the enactment of the imagination, experience is not sufficient to define the contents of Hume has splendidly termed as the “union in the fancy”. Scattered images find their “union in the fancy”, and from that fabric impressions and experiences may arise. In more broad terms, custom and habit set limits to imagination and the very operation of imagination is submitted to the universal principles of resemblance, contiguity in time and space, and cause and effect. But these limits – external and internal – are far from sufficient in defining the contents of the acts of imagining. A moderate and expedient effort must be enacted to the effects of these acts, but not its fabric in itself.

### **Political philosophy and imagination: A constructivist circuit**

For the sake of conclusion, I would like to return to one of Hume's fragments, already commented in my presentation.

For analytical purposes we can imagine an circuit, composed of some discrete steps,

following the theory of the loss of vivacity, presented in the following proposition: “...by losing its force and vivacity [*an idea of memory*] may degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for an *idea of imagination*”. The circuit can be formalized in this way:

**External World [I] (Experience -> Impressions -> Memory [I] Imagination)**

In that sequence, we can identify a *zone of vivacity* – in the nexus between experience, impressions, and memory -, and a *zone of hallucination*, which is coextensive with imagination.

For the same analytical purposes, we may pose an alternative circuit, based on the complement of the proposition already alluded: ...an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgement”. The alternative circuit can be presented as followed:

**Imagination -> Memory -> Impressions -> Experience**

From the image of these possible circuits, we may infer the possibilities of a constructivist sequence, according to which ideas of imagination can configure human experience, through its passage to the domains of impressions and experience itself. Note that Hume, in order to allow that kind of possibility, doesn't seem to abandon his strong tenets that impressions are the strong bearers of vivacity. The inverted circuit opens a new way to address the rather foggy problem of the sources of impressions, since they may be based on effects of imagination.

Hume's favourite example, when considering the inverted circuit, is the case of the liar: “by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to believe and to remember them, as realities”. I think it's possible to understand “lies” – besides any therapeutic and pathological components – as paroxysms of imagination. If it is plausible, so it doesn't appear as unreasonable to ask: how many propositions in the realm of political philosophy may sound as paroxysms of imagination?