

Politics, imagination, Humean inflections*

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Resumen

Como uno entre muchos plausibles puntos de partida, quisiera explorar una posible distinción entre dos diferentes enfoques que pueden ser encontrados a lo largo de los escritos sobre política de Hume. Alguien podría afirmar que ambas perspectivas se unen constituyendo un único sistema, sin embargo temo que si tomamos cada cara de la moneda por separado, la imagen resultante no le hará justicia a la integralidad de la filosofía política de Hume. Una de las razones para la no exclusión de estas visiones puede ser encontrada en el hecho de que ambas provienen del propósito originalmente humeano de aplicar el método experimental a los aspectos morales de una ciencia de la naturaleza humana.

Palabras clave: Hume, Naturaleza humana, Filosofía política

Abstract

As one of the several possible points of departure, I would like to explore a possible distinction between two different approaches that can be found along David Hume's writings about politics. One may say that both perspectives hold together and constitute a system but I fear that if we take each one side of the picture in isolation from the other, the resulting image won't make justice to the originality of Hume's overall political philosophy. One of the reasons for the

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non-excludability of these visions may be found in the fact that both come from the original Humean purpose to apply the experimental method on the moral aspects of a science of human nature.

Keywords: Hume, Human nature, Political philosophy

“...objects that have already a union in the fancy...”
(Hume, 1987: 504n)

1. Initial remarks, sketchy purposes

As one of the several possible points of departure, I would like to explore a possible distinction between two different approaches that can be found along David Hume’s writings about politics. One may say that both perspectives hold together and constitute a system but I fear that if we take each one side of the picture in isolation from the other, the resulting image won’t make justice to the originality of Hume’s overall political philosophy. One of the reasons for the non-excludability of these visions may be found in the fact that both come from the original Humean purpose to apply the experimental method on the moral aspects of a science of human nature.

These two perspectives can be described in this way: (i) a *natural science of politics* and (ii) a *philosophy of politics*, or a *philosophical politics*, as posed by Duncan Forbes in his classic comment about the political facet of Hume’s philosophy (FORBES, 1975). It would be gullible to suggest that these perspectives take place in Humean texts in a separate and discrete manner, waiting for an unproblematic recognition by the analysts. Not infrequently they do, but there are interesting instances in which naturalist descriptions of politics appear mingled with philosophical assumptions. Indeed, according to David Miller, “philosophical and substantive questions” treated by Hume, opposed as they can appear to naked eyes, belong to the same “intellectual system”: a system in which “certain beliefs are more abstract and general, others more concrete and specific” (MILLER, 1981: 11).

The first perspective – the *natural science of politics* -, if taken in isolation, seems to be the work of a naturalist. Indeed, in several junctures of his *Essays*, Hume develops what can be termed as a *natural history of governments and institutions*. That kind of narrative, to my mind, appears in itself as highly innovative. Even though that narrative not infrequently relies on examples and stories, its main purpose is not to assemble – as in the case of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* – a endless assortment of cases, but to reveal some basic and

necessary mechanisms that canvass and substantiate the operations of governments and institutions. If in Montaigne multiple essays, phenomenal data are submitted to causal incertitude, Hume's approach is based on the opposite belief: *the same causes tend to produce similar effects*. Institutions, in this way, can be perceived as mechanisms of causal stabilization and predictability.

The bulk of my reference to the *natural science of politics* will pick up the threads of some of Hume's political essays as references. My aim, in that part of the text, will be to suggest that both Hume's *realism* and *institutionalism* can be better understood as *languages* oriented by a pair of well entrenched Sceptical purposes: (i) to avoid dogmatism in the realm of public philosophy and (ii) to introduce a theory about institutions in which, being primarily a artifact of human imagination, they are conceived as devices devoted to the fixation of habits.

The second perspective – a *philosophy of politics* - deals with non-empirical questions. If in the course of the *Essays* (1741) – and in the *History of England* (1754-1762) - Hume adopts descriptive protocols, some passages of Book III of the *Treatise* (1739) reveal a fine analytical tune. More precisely, in these passages crucial issues such as justice, property and government are presented as *works of human imagination*. In other words, and for the sake of greater precision, David Hume presents reasons for justice and politics *ex ante*, previously to any attempt to proceed to the systematic description of historical accidents, which are presented thoroughly in the *History of England* and along some of the *Essays*. If Hume was a historian – and indeed he was - it is compulsory to add that he was the practitioner of a philosophical history.

In dealing with the *philosophy of politics*, I will rely on some of Hume's passages concerning the invention of justice and property in which the role of imagination is portentous. I will also delve into the universe of the Book I of the *Treatise* to summon up some features of imagination as productive faculties. My aim is to suggest not only that imagination is a driven force in Hume's philosophy of politics but also that it plays a prominent role in the very fabric of our impressions, the more vivid of our affections.

I will start by stressing some aspects of Hume's allegedly institutionalism. After that I will turn to considerations about the connections between justice, property and imagination. To conclude, I will present some features of imagination, adding that they should be considered as core dimensions of Hume's philosophy of politics.

2. Hume, realism, institutionalism: a brief reappraisal

Contemporary political scientists – assuming they may have some interest in David Hume's philosophy – tend to consider *le bon David* as a naturalist observer of politics. In other words, they are inclined to take the Scottish

philosopher, notwithstanding some fuzzy metaphysics, as one of their flock, albeit as a distant forerunner. The naturalist observer of politics aims at describing institutional practices and its regular effects, assuming that political institutions are the main clue for the right understanding of the social dynamics.

From that perspective, Hume would join Machiavelli in the team of the “empirically grounded political scientists”, to make use of the terms posed by Frederick Whelan (WHELAN, 2004: 10). *Realism* and *institutionalism*, under that kind of association, can be taken as compulsory components of this supposed “empirically grounded” project. Indeed, in the Introduction of his *Treatise* – and in its subtitle – Hume seems to confirm this inclination by the appeal to the necessity of an experimental approach to morals. However, it is debatable if the decision to espouse such an experimental program implies the adoption of a rigid empirically grounded approach to politics and history. As a matter of fact, in following such an experimental proclivity, Hume has started by analyzing – in the Section IV (“Of the connection or association of ideas”) of the Book I of his *Treatise* -, the mechanism of association of ideas in the human mind as a clue for a science of human nature, which constitutes a clear internalist drive. But, in order to develop my argument I would like to consider the alleged Hume’s fondness for realism and institutionalism.

In his book about Machiavelli and Hume, Whelan offers a useful list of attributes that can be found in realistic narratives about politics. In an abridged form they can be listed in the subsequent manner:

- i. a “rejection of ideal theorizing in favor of a more pessimistic, empirically based analysis of political life”;
- ii. the perception of the real world of politics as “highly conflictual and frequently dangerous”;
- iii. “the analytic centrality of power in the relation among political actors and states”;
- iv. “the need of prudent and rational” calculation in “policy-making”;
- v. “a pervasive sense of moral ambivalence in political life”: “good political ends sometimes necessarily requires bad means” (WHELAN, 2004: 5).

To sum up these traits, realism can be perceived as a mixture of *anthropological pessimism* with a tough comprehension of *politics as a struggle based on the use of force*. If its effects are conducive to acceptable ends, we may add *fraud* to the latter aspect we may add *fraud*. Despite the indisputable importance of *fraud*, *anthropological pessimism* and the *argument of force* can be assumed as necessary components for any realistic narrative on politics. These arguments may be detected amidst a large tradition of political thinkers and philosophers that goes from Trasimachus - in the defense of force as the bearer of justice, in Plato’s *Republic* -, to James Madison - in the belief in the non-hagiological nature of human beings, as posed in *Federalist* No. 51 in an

unequivocal statement: *If men were angels, no government would be necessary* (CAREY & MACLELLAN, 2001: 268). Of course, we could go well beyond in the assortment of examples, following the time-line.

Pessimism about human nature (hypothetical, not descriptive)

Although the topic of anthropological pessimism is not central both to the *Treatise* and to the *Enquiries*, there is some textual support for it in the *Essays*. Undeniably, Hume's realistic and institutionalist arguments, as developed in the *Essays*, have needed some reliance on pessimism about human nature. In several fragments of Hume's *Essays* such kind of pessimism is apparent. As a general assumption, humankind beings are presented as composed by fallible beings, often incapable for the detection of their real interest: "...frequently he (man) is seduced from his great and important, but distant, interests, by the allurements of present, though often very frivolous temptations" (HUME, 1985: 38).

Moreover, humans are presented as beings oriented by selfish and immediate motives and, according to Hume, this aspect must be taken into account for a realistic understanding of their behavior.

Nevertheless, Hume's most prolific pessimistic proposition is not written in the language of moral contempt and cannot be perceived as a result of the application of descriptive protocols. Actually, it is more *hypothetical* than *descriptive*. Some terms of that language may be found in one of the *Essays* – "Of the independence of parliament". They assert as "a just *political* maxim that every man must be supposed to be a knave" (HUME, 1985: 42). It is worth to note that Hume has stressed the word *political*, clearly to avoid untenable generalization. It seems that the maxim doesn't claim to be a descriptive account of human behavior *sub specie aeternitatis*, but just an indispensable, although fictional, statement *from the point of view of politics*. Politics in that sense can be conceived as based on a hypothetical assumption, indeed a gloomy one about the nature of human behavior.

The hypothetical aspect of the maxim was widened by Hume's admission of its strangeness if perceived from the point of view of ordinary life: "it appears strange, that a maxim should be true in *politics* and false in *fact*" (HUME, 1985: 42). Hume, at that point, seems to turn upside down the famous maxim posed by Bernard Mandeville – *private vice, public benefit* –, by saying that "men are generally more honest in their private than in their public capacity" (HUME, 1985: 43). Thus, a conceivable Humean version of the maxim can be established in this way: *private virtue, public vice*. In their "private capacity" human beings are curbed by the impositions of "honor". That kind of "check" disappears as they come to the public domain. In that field, honor is, "in a great measure, removed" (HUME, 1985: 43).

Undeniably, there is some strangeness in the argument. What forces may turn private virtues into public vices? What processes are at work in the erasing of personal honor? According to Mandeville, the *arts of wise legislation* – or of institutional dexterity – help to contain vices and, at the same time, to make them necessary and productive conditions for public virtue. In the case of Hume, one is tempted to say that *the works of bad legislation and inadequate institutional making* may help to explain the conversion of an original and private virtue towards a resulting public vice. Through his hypothetical assumption, Hume seems to locate vice not in the original and isolated condition of human beings, but as result of human collectivities and combinations *not bounded by laws and regulations*. A human being alone with her/his interest is harmless to society. If combined with others of the same kind, this is a sure receipt for the creation and proliferation of “separate interest”. If they are not checked, “faction, disorder, and tyranny” follow.

From Humean perspective there is something dangerous in political collectivities, not bounded by “a skillful division of power” (HUME, 1985: 43). In that sense, institutional dexterity appears as a *requirement for social predictability*.

In private, beliefs and interests don't seem to be harmful to the public since they are not contested by opposite perspectives, and may remain silent or curbed by the impositions of honor. As long as they remain private, they are not vulnerable to political gambits and cannot coalesce with similar interests or principles. The passage to politics may establish a friend-foe frame, across sectarian and uncompromising lines. That state of affairs can be taken as a model for dogmatic politics. In that sense, institutional dexterity can be perceived as an effort to minimize the effects of sectarianism, factionalism, and the possibility of tyranny. More than realist, Hume seems to be convinced of the necessity to avoid tyranny as one probable consequence of untamed political quarrels.

Instead of *malignity, complexity* becomes visible as the main human basic element. A composite view of human nature appears as an alternative to one-dimension narratives. Such a composite view is formed by several and complementary aspects of human behavior, disposed in Hume's writings (*Treatise, Enquires, and the History of England*), in addition to the *Essays*. Some aspects of this composed identity form the image of an active being: the governance of *passions* (T 2), the role of *interest* (T 3.2.2., 495) and the works of *imagination* (T 3.2.3). These lively facets of human nature appear in connection with a stabilizing facet. Passions, interests and imagination are all dimensions of a “habit-or custom-forming animal” (LAURSEN, 1992: 151). The order-seeking animal is also a potentially disordering/re-ordering/acting being. To deal with the everlasting possibility of uncontrolled effects, enacted by the

works of such a complex agent, it seems prudent for Hume to assume an extreme perspective: all men must be supposed to be knaves.

Realism (historical and sociological, not primarily political)

Realism in politics, not infrequently, is associated with the affirmation of force as a necessary component of authority. Hume, in one of the *Essays* – “On the original contract” -, admits that necessary connection:

“Almost all the government, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people” (HUME, 1985: 471).

Hume mobilized the argument against the idea of an original contract as a necessary and remote condition for civil and political society. The mentioned essay, to be sure, contains an array of arguments erected against the natural law tradition. But the *usurpation-conquest argument* doesn't seem to be central for that purpose. It can be considered as a minor piece of the whole effort. Based on evidences collected in his *Essays*, the core of Hume's realism is not defined by the typical realistic narrative of the political philosophers. As an alternative, we may consider Hume's perspective as marked by three distinct and complementary forms of realism: a *historical realism*, a *sociological realism* and a *natural-realistic conception of the role of ideas in politics*. For all these variants, realism means an uncompromising avoidance to consider human affairs as determined by self-evident rational truths.

As for the first kind of realism – *historical* -, traces of it may be detected in the essay “On the origin of government”. Here Hume depicts a model of concision and completion. In a remarkably succinct way, Hume establishes the references for a *natural history of government*. Government was an effect of *human necessity*, *natural inclination* and *habit*. Its basic aim is to administrate justice, which is presented as a necessary condition for peace, reciprocal relations and security (HUME, 1985: 38). Moreover, government “commences more casually and more imperfectly” (HUME, 1985: 39). In other words, its history cannot be conceived as an effect of rational design.

The necessity of government appears also as associated with a particular trace of human nature: “all men are sensible of the necessity of justice” (HUME, 1985: 38). However, that sensibility – “strong and obvious” – is affected by the “frailty or perverseness” of human nature. Obedience emerges as a “palliative” for that fallible condition. It comes out as something that “must be invented”. Obedience, in that sense, is a “factitious duty”.

Government and justice are creations of an order-seeking animal. In that sense, both may be considered as components of *the political facet of habit*: if habit is a central attribute of human experience, when the theme of civil life is

considered, government and justice appears as specific devices of habituation. By being “factitious”, habits of justice are no less fictitious and devoted to the fixation of habits of behavior.

Humean political science, to a great extent, is devoted to describing the effects of the habits of justice and of government. Such a description takes the form of a *natural history of human artifices*. As we are considering artificial worlds, we are not prevented to find in its operations some causal regularity. In that sense, in his analysis, in spite of displaying his sensibility for human absurdities and predicaments, Hume explains political matters as automatic consequences of institutional settings. Just to remind the point: division of power engenders the conditions for a “government to be wise and happy”; “separated interests not checked” are conducive to “faction, disorder, and tyranny”; and so on. There is a kind of presumption of causality at work as an original condition for political and social predictability.

Historical realism also means the refusal to concede to reason any role in a reconstruction of the social and political world. The very idea of a reconstruction sounds meaningless to Hume’s ears. In the essay “On the original contract”, Hume considers the hypothesis of a rational reconstruction of history and concludes that such task would require

“... a generation of men go off the stage at once, and another succeed, as is the case with silk-worms and butterflies, the new race (...) might voluntarily, and by general consent, establish their own form of civil polity, without any regard to the laws or precedents, which prevailed among their ancestors” (HUME, 1985: 476).

The task of a rational reconstruction seems to be impossible, since “human society is in perpetual flux, one man every hour going, another coming” (HUME, 1985: 476). The image of the flux reminds a similar sensibility, showed by Montaigne in one of his most inspired fragments (in the “Apologie de Raymond Sebond”), based on a comparison between history and the flux of a large river (MONTAIGNE, 1992 : 583)¹.

An alternative view about the flux of human history can be detected in the essay “On national character” where Hume deals with the operations and effects of “moral causes” on national experiences. He starts by giving a conceptual definition of what a moral cause means:

¹ “Les loix prennent leur autorité de la possession et de l’usage; il est dangereux de les ramener à leur naissance: elles grossissent et s’ennoblissent en roulant, comme nos rivières: suivez les contremont jusques à leur source, ce n’est qu’un petit surion d’eau à peine reconnoissable, qui s’enorgueillit ainsin et se fortifie en vieillissant. Voyez les anciennes considerations qui ont donné le premier branle à ce faneux torrent, plein de dignité, d’horreur et de reverence: vous les trouverez si légères et si délicats, que ces gens ici qui poisent tout et le ramanant à la raison, et qui ne reçoivent rien par autorité et à crédit, il n’est pas merveille s’ils ont leur jugemens souvent tres-esloignez des jugemens publiques”.

“By *moral causes*, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us” (HUME, 1985: 198).

The mentioned circumstances are fourfold, namely:

- (i) The nature of government;
- (ii) The revolutions of public affairs;
- (iii) The plenty or penury in which the people live;
- (iv) The situation of the nation with regard to its neighbors.

Hume’s seems to suggest that moral causes generate regular effects on the social fabric. “Poverty and hard work”, for instance, “debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession” (HUME, 1985: 198). In that sense, there are some sociological patterns at work inside social order. Human action follows, in spite of its capacity of invention and innovation, the lines established through these patterns. Moral causes, in that sense, being recollections of past experiences possess a resilient feature and can work as if they produce “natural” effects.

Following that Humean sensibility for patterns, we may also find in Hume’s sociological realism traces of a theory of social types and roles. In the same essay, Hume compares soldiers and priests as social types whose regular habits produce different and “natural” consequences. Thus, soldiers’ “incertitude of their life (...) makes them lavish and generous, as well as brave” (HUME, 1985: 199). As for priests and after warning the readers that priests “of all religion are the same”, Hume associates their practice and beliefs with the “promotion of ignorance and superstition and implicit faith and pious fraud” (HUME, 1985: 200).

It seems undisputable that the fragments mentioned above exhibit clear signs of Hume’s personal beliefs and opinions about the role of priests and soldiers. Even so, the case is presented as methodologically grounded in a social theory that purports to associate *sociological patterns* – always in combination with sets of beliefs - and *habits of action*. This is precisely what I mean by the expression *sociological realism*.

Institutions and reasons for institutionalism narrative

The core of Hume’s institutional narrative can be detected in his famous essay about the feasibility of a science of politics (“That politics may be reduced to a science”). The argument is based on three maxims of institutionalism:

- i. “So great is the force of Law, and particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences

almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us" (HUME, 1985: 16).

ii. "...so little dependence has this affair on the humours and education of particular men, that one part of the same republic may be wisely conducted, and another weakly, by the very same men, merely on account of the difference of the form of institutions, by which these parts are regulated" (HUME, 1985: 24).

iii. "The ages of greatest public spirit are not always most eminent for private virtue. Good laws may beget order and moderation in the government, where the manners and customs have instilled little humanity or justice into the tempers of men" (HUME, 1985: 25).

This array of arguments is devoted to the refutation of a classical humanistic paradigm. According to its tenets, the quality of governments is supposed to be dependent on the private honor of rulers. A good and sound political order requires, under that perspective, strong moral references and considerable awareness of the public interest. Ordinary folks and vicious politicians, moved by private passions and interests, are unfit for the task. Only the virtuous prince could match the task of shaping a virtuous public order.

Facing this argument, Hume firstly admits some connection between the quality of government and the excellence of its rulers, adding nevertheless that the nexus is consistent only in the case of personal and absolute government. In this case there is a necessary connection between private behavior and beliefs of rulers and the quality of public life. As for "republics", the humanist creed is refutable. In these cases, the shape and quality of institutions and the laws appear as decisive components, instead of the biographical elements of their leaders. Hume in this passage seems to contradict the Republican tradition's *clausula petrea*, based on a necessary connection between public happiness and moral excellence of rulers.

The superiority of "republics" and "monarchies" over "absolute governments", for Hume, doesn't seem to be primarily a matter of institutional preference. The superior forms appear as alternatives for concentrated sovereignty, the most suitable institutional form of dogmatic rule. Institutionalism, in Humean tune, can be defined as a useful political language for conveying the concerns of a Sceptic: instead of a strong and uncontrolled attachment to values and interests, a Sceptical polity requires efforts of imagination devoted to the fixation of general and impersonal rules of government.

Historical institutions and personalities populate Hume's political essays. The very purpose of the *Essays* – a piece of public philosophy – obliges its author to deal with ordinary facts and examples, in a permanent effort to extract from confused empirical and historical data some analytical and permanent traits. As stated before, such perspective is made public by means of an institutional narrative. The whole picture can be summarized in the idea that

regularity provided by well-conceived and stable institutions is a necessary condition for good government and social peace. History, as human cumulative experience, is the main source for that everlasting endeavor to invent laws and institutions. That means to say that institutions can be perceived as artificial simulations of regular causalities. From a *habit in the mind*, causality becomes a *habit in history* through the works and arts of invention of “factitious” mechanisms. Imagination is the main source for this endless process of invention.

Imagination, property and justice

Imagination seems to occupy a privileged role in the making of one of the most important of human institutions: property. As it 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, from the observation of regular possession, that the idea and the institution of property become possible. The most intriguing aspect of that transit 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 the experience” (FORBES, 1975: 10).

The Humean 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, 1987: 509).

This inclination, as Hume admits, is so strong as it often makes 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: Hume has in mind “objects that have already a union in the fancy...” (HUME, 1987: 504n).

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 subject of justice. The theme of justice, as considered by Hume in the *Treatise* and in the second *Enquiry*, is prior to the reflection about specific political institutions and their historical origins. More precisely, in Hume’s writings justice appears as the main institution of human society, as it works in

regular, public and predictable manners. In that sense, justice requires, for its invention 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. To put it another way, it's possible to detect some Hobbesian accent in the statement. But the impression of affinity vanishes as we add one Humean central argument to the picture: more than selfishness and scarcity, "confined generosity" seems to be strongest move for justice. In addition, it must be mentioned that "generosity" is a very special kind of motive, which being a natural virtue, is a necessary condition for justice. At the same time, its intrinsic frailty and its unpredictable and erratic 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 behavior, the type of interest that leads to justice is a special one. Hume denies "the interest, which gave rise to them (i. e., the rules of justice) ... (is) 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 appears as 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 adhesion to a "whole plan and scheme of justice". There is a huge gap between these poles. Imagination makes it bridgeable.

Aspects of imagination, or what Hume has to say about imagination

Imagination as opposed to memory

In his first account of the issue, in the *Treatise*, Hume establishes a distinction between *imagination* and *memory*. Accordingly, memory occurs when an original impression, turned an idea in the mind, "retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity" (HUME, 1987: 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 corresponding 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, 1987: 8). In the case of imagination, “the perception is faint and languid, and cannot without difficulty be preserved by the mind steadily and uniform for any considerable time” (HUME, 1987: 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, 1987: 9). In a subsequent section of the text, Hume asserts the “liberty of imagination to transpose and change its ideas” (HUME, 1987: 10).

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 judgment” (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: both have “some influence on the mind as nature, and infixing the idea with equal force and vigour” (HUME, 1987: 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, gives 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 – by establishing 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 enlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any subject” (HUME, 1987: 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** (*ea.*)”.

To sum up, the inherent attributes of imagination are empowered by the force of custom. To make clear his statement about the attributes of imagination, Hume recalls the liar analogy in these subsequent lines:

“As liars, by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to remember them; so the judgment, 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, 1987: 117).

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, 1987: 140).

The quotation reveals a fresh angle to access the links between imagination and habit/custom. If we take habit and custom as permanent projections of the past into 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 much dependent on the faculties of imagination.

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, 1987: 385).

In a nutshell, the following aspects can be considered as the main attributes of imagination:

- Perfect Idea;
- Faint and languid perception;
- Imagination not restrained by original impressions;
- Association with habits and customs;
- Enlargement effects upon sympathy.

In addition to these aspects, imagination is submitted to what may be termed as a sort of *Principle of Restlessness*: it cannot be preserved by the mind for any considerable time; in that sense, it looks for fixation outside the mind. As a result it poses a conflict between the continuous productivity of imagination as human faculty and the impossibility of a steady and continuous fixation in the mind. As a result, imagination must mingle itself into ordinary life through the mechanisms of habit and custom, by a sort of an acting-out effect.

As a final remark, I would like to suggest that imagination, beyond the role it plays in the accomplishments of politics and history, can also be interpreted as a *constructivist device*. To make this point a little less foggy, it is worth to return to one Hume's aforementioned passage which contains what one may term as a *theory of the loss of vivacity*. Let me quote it once again:

“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 judgment” (HUME, 1987: 86).

If we take, for analytical purposes, the first part of the quoted sentence – the left side of the semicolon divide, it is possible to imagine a circuit composed by some discrete steps, all of them stemmed from the theory of the loss of vivacity. The circuit can be formalized in this way:

Experience > Impressions > Ideas > Memory > Imagination

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

For the same analytical purposes, and taking into account the second segment of the quoted sentence – the right side of the semicolon divide -, we may pose an alternative circuit that can be presented as followed:

Imagination > Memory > Ideas > Impressions > Experience

From the image of these possible circuits, we may infer the possibility of a constructivist sequence, according to which ideas of imagination shape human experience, by means of their effects on the domain of the impressions, besides experience itself. Note that Hume, in order to allow that kind of possibility, doesn't need to abandon his strong tenet that impressions are the original bearers of vivacity. The constructivist effect stems from the role played by imagination in the very fabric of our impressions. By doing so, imagination, although not produced by an original impression affects the making of the most vivid of the human affections. Additionally, the inverted circuit seems to open a new way to address the rather cloudy problem of the sources of impressions, since they may be based on effects of imagination. To put it differently, other

than the anatomist, philosophers may have a say in the field of the origin of our impressions.

Be that as it may, in Hume's favorite example, the case of the liar emerges once again when considering the inverted circuit: "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 this is plausible, it doesn't seem unreasonable to ask: how many propositions in the field of political philosophy may sound as paroxysms of imagination?

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