



## **Hume's Theory of Imagination**

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## HUME'S THEORY OF IMAGINATION<sup>†</sup>

Historians of philosophy seem increasingly to agree with the view that David Hume is the greatest philosopher ever to have written in English. This high esteem of the Scottish empiricist, however, is a phenomenon of the last decades. As late as 1925 Charles W. Hendel could write "that Hume is no longer a living figure."<sup>1</sup> And Stuart Hampshire reports that in the Oxford of the Thirties the results of Humean philosophizing were regarded as "extravagances of scepticism which no one could seriously accept."<sup>2</sup>

A cursory glance at the Hume bibliography edited by Roland Hall demonstrates that it has become standard practice in the English-speaking world to seek an understanding of Hume's arguments when analysing philosophical problems. Critical literature nevertheless continues to neglect the majority of his arguments. It is sufficient, I think, to mention Hume's remarks on space and time, his theory of emotions, his inquiries into the problem of justice, his economic writings and those on the psychology of religion. But even in the frequently quoted passages of the Treatise<sup>3</sup> Hume's central notion is not, in my opinion, at the heart of the analysis. Here I refer to Hume's remarks on the phenomenon of imagination (fancy). Although he mentions this curious faculty of our cognition on almost every page, there are only a few sporadic attempts at an interpretation of this "supreme Humean faculty."<sup>4</sup> This may be due to the fact that until quite recently the 'problem of imagination' has hardly even belonged to the marginal topics of modern philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

This paper therefore attempts to demonstrate not only that Hume dealt with the phenomenon of imagination, but also that an analysis of this concept is of paramount significance for the understanding of his entire philosophy. In the first three sections three different faculties or functions of the imagination will be distinguished. Not only the artist's

works, but also the insights of the scientist and the illusions of metaphysicians are, according to Hume, decisively based on this very cognitive faculty. Section 4 contains a brief discussion of the sceptical arguments of the Treatise, particularly of the Humean analysis of causation. Their impact on Hume's reflections on the problem of imagination is the topic of Section 5. I hope to prove that in the Enquiry Hume interprets these sceptical arguments differently than in the Treatise. While in his early work he feels himself exposed to Pyrrhonian doubts, he assumes the position of an 'academic sceptic' in the Enquiry. The concluding section eventually tries to determine which motives may have been decisive for Hume's change of opinion. I shall defend the thesis that in his late work Hume developed an 'ethics of belief' on the basis of natural beliefs, in which the artistic capacity of the imagination assumes a decisive role in justifying philosophical and scientific propositions.

### 1. The Metaphysical Faculty of the Imagination

In the Introduction to the Treatise Hume describes his endeavour as developing a propaedeutic basic science which should provide a better understanding of all products of the human mind (science, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, politics). In the Abstract he calls his early work "a system of the sciences" (A7).

Besides this empirical interest Hume saw the importance of justifying the choice of method, i.e. to extoll the experimental procedure as the only rational one. Metaphysical approaches are interpreted as products of a blind imagination. Beginning with the Introduction to the Treatise it has been a constant motive of Hume's philosophy to constrain metaphysics in order to make way for science.

In the sections Of the effects of other relations and other habits (T106-117), Of unphilosophical probability

(T143-155), Of scepticism with regard to the senses (T187-218), Of the antient philosophy (T219-225) Hume specifies those beliefs which, in his opinion, are based on figments of our imagination. He "had seen that all the errors of philosophy arose from the fact that imagination determined men much more than they recognized - there could be no secure truth for him, then, until he had explored this aspect of the nature of man."<sup>6</sup> He compares imagination to a ship which, having been set in motion by oars, carries on its course without any new impulse (T198). Though experience is the true measure, we seldom regulate ourselves entirely by it; but have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation (T113). In prejudices we combine assertions with a claim to objectivity although we know of counterexamples. Hume discusses the same generalizing tendency of the imagination in the case of anthropomorphism, transferring characteristics of known phenomena in analogy to interpersonal relations.

*But among all the instances, wherein the Peripatetics have shewn they were guided by every trivial propensity of the imagination, no one is more remarkable than their sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum. There is a very remarkable inclination in human nature, to bestow on external objects the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find every where those ideas, which are most present to it. (T224)*

Finally, Hume believes to have recognized the effects of subjective imagination also in traditional ontologies. In that case, philosophers infer the existence of 'extra-mental' objects from similarities in their own experience.

Hume regards the metaphysical systems which he wishes to demarcate from science as mere fictions of the imagination (T108), merely the offspring of the imagination (T108), and

as *trivial suggestions of the fancy* (T267). He sees in them the rule of blind imagination which in philosophy makes us hypothesize worlds above and beyond that of our own experience. Since Plato philosophers have endeavoured to lead up to this other reality on a purely conceptual base. The Milesian efforts at marking off the realm of mere appearance from that of true reality may well be regarded as the origin of philosophical thought. Hume too employs this distinction, though his real world is that of induction and not that of dialectics. Hume thinks that Plato's attempt to prove that an object may be more real than another, according to the extent to which it participates in its idea, leads directly into metaphysical no man's land. To make assertions about a reality other than the empirical is a subjective play on words, a pathetic fallacy, or an unsubstantiated figment, whether this other world be that of ghosts, ideas or material objects. In all these cases we talk without thinking.

This is, I believe, Hume's epistemological programme before his analysis of causal inferences and of the self.

## 2. The Artistic Faculty of the Imagination

The ability of the imagination to construct concepts (propositions, objects, systems) transcending the empirical realm will henceforth be called its metaphysical faculty. But Hume distinguishes two further functions of the imagination. In the Treatise the term 'imagination' occurs within the first few sentences, in connection with the question of the origin of our ideas. While memory allows us to recall past experiences, we can make use of the imagination to produce new ideas by imposing a new order on past impressions. If someone describes a lake we do not know, we have to rely on the imagination to provide us with ideas which, although built up from memories, are put in a new order so that they are no longer memories for us, but ideas of the imagination. We shall then 'see' Paris without ever having been there.

When reading a novel something similar occurs. This faculty of the imagination to reorganize past impressions, which serve as elements or building-blocks, will henceforth be called its artistic faculty. Especially in Hume's time, the artistic faculty was conceived of as the ability to place known impressions into new relationships with one another.

While the metaphysical faculty postulates the existence of objects which cannot be empirically known, such as 'absolute space' or 'substance which transcends consciousness', the products of the artistic faculty are objects of possible experience:

*'Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible. (T32)*

This claim that *whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, becomes, for Hume, the criterion for distinguishing analytic and synthetic propositions. A proposition is analytic if its negation is self-contradictory. Since one may conceive of a world in which objects fall upwards, the justification of the claim that on our planet objects tend towards the centre of the earth requires also a confirmation by experience. The only observation decisive for our train of thought is that in Hume's philosophy the artistic faculty of the imagination plays an important part also in the justification of philosophical propositions. (More will be said below).

### 3. The Scientific Faculty of the Imagination

Hume paid great attention to the artistic faculty. He even sums up the ability of the imagination to break

through the given order of things in a principle of its own, the principle, of the liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas. (T10). But the imagination is not only of importance in inventing fairy tales. For Hume it eventually becomes the very expression of human creativity:

*Nothing is more admirable, than the readiness, with which the imagination suggests its ideas, and presents them at the very instant, in which they become necessary or useful. The fancy runs from one end of the universe to the other in collecting those ideas, which belong to any subject. One would think the whole intellectual world of ideas was at once subjected to our view, and that we did nothing but pick out such as were most proper for our purpose. There may not, however, be any present, beside those very ideas, that are thus collected by a kind of magical faculty in the soul, which, tho' it be always most perfect in the greatest geniuses, and is properly what we call a genius, is however inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding.* (T24)

Hume regretfully did not follow up this idea of an unconscious, qualitative selection of ideas. But after having discovered in his famous experiment on the nature of the blue patch that the imagination even seems to be capable of producing simple ideas, he is very careful to point out its limits in subsequent chapters.

Hume takes the vivacity of the ideas produced by the imagination to be one of its most important limitations. Creations of the imagination do not, in general, attain the same intensity as memories and experiences. Neither can an impression *become present to the mind, without being determined in its degrees both of quantity and quality* (T19). We cannot picture a colour which does not in some way assume a certain form. Neither is it possible to picture an entirely colourless object. Only a particular colour, taste, and smell (T2, my italics) can be an example of a simple perception. Hume considers that a further limitation of the imagination lies in the fact, that, with the above mentioned

exception,

*all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind ... Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, ... (T67f.)*

The artistic faculty, too, is confined to the rather narrow domain of one's own perceptions. An absolute space devoid of matter is inconceivable even to the imagination.

The most interesting limitation of the imagination is claimed to be on the level of the association of ideas. These are usually not at all chaotic, but ordered according to certain aspects. Though *nothing is more free than that faculty (=imagination)*, it is normally guided by some universal principles... by which one idea naturally introduces another (T10). Out of the seven aspects listed in the Treatise according to which we impose an order on the unstructured stream of impressions, the Enquiry retains Resemblance, Contiguity in time or place, and Cause or Effect (E24). The causal relationship is the most important structure the perceiving subject uses for ordering his experiences, since it is by means of this relationship that we go beyond a simple statement of the given and are able to establish science. But are causal connections not simply perceivable?

*The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was connected: but only that it was conjoined with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of connexion? Nothing but that he now feels these events to be connected in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other. (E75f.)*

Since we never perceive a propter hoc, but only a post hoc, causal connections have to depend upon the creative imagination. It thereby has the function of bridging the gap between the observed and the unobserved. Causal relationships are really to us the cement of the universe (A32). This is one of Hume's great discoveries. The faculty of the imagination neither to transcend the empirical world nor to impose a new order upon the sense impressions, but rather to structure the stream of perceptions, shall henceforth be called its scientific faculty.

The distinction between the metaphysical and the scientific faculty of the imagination becomes explicit in several passages of the Treatise. Hume even warns the reader of his different uses of the term 'imagination' (T117f., T371). I think that it is the general topic of his epistemology to draw a line of demarcation between these two functions. In the final chapter he writes: *'Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects; and 'tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu'd existence of external objects, when absent from the senses.* (T266). In the chapter Of scepticism with regard to the senses he argues that our belief in an external reality is based on the metaphysical faculty since scientific experiments are not able to convince us of a permanent and transempirical external world. The products of the scientific faculty are described as *fixt and unalterable* (T110), those of the metaphysical faculty as *very feeble and uncertain* (T109). In the chapter Of modern philosophy Hume states this difference just as explicitly:

*In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; ... The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither*

*unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. (T225)*

For the sake of illustrating this Hume gives the following example: If one hears a voice in the dark and concludes that there must be someone nearby, he thinks *justly and naturally*; if he, however, expects a spectre, his behaviour is

*contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man. The opinions of the antient philosophers, their fictions of substance and accident, and their reasonings concerning substantial forms and occult qualities, are like the spectres in the dark, and are deriv'd from principles, which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature. The modern philosophy pretends to be entirely free from this defect, and to arise only from the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination. (T226)*

Only the products of the scientific faculty are permanent, irresistible, and universal - without them human nature would perish at once. Those of the metaphysical faculty, on the other hand, are changeable, weak, and irregular, neither inevitable nor necessary, and even harmful. By their arbitrariness they destroy human communication.

These are but further formulations of Hume's basic assumption that only empirical propositions are justifiable. In his analysis of causation Hume attempts to demonstrate that causal inferences may be justified. The empiricists' claim that none but empirical propositions are justifiable is, then, in no need of further confirmation.

#### 4. Hume's Scepticism

In the Treatise Hume's doubt hinges on the problem of the verifiability of empirical propositions, on the questions as to the sources of error of the mind, and on the

status of external objects. Though it is not possible to enter into the latter two issues here, the main argument of Hume's analysis of causation shall be briefly outlined.

Hume answers the psychological question as to how causal connections originate by imagining a creature equipped with a perfect intellectual apparatus but devoid of any experience. Could Adam, if put into our world, predict events? Hume denies this since Adam could not know which of the imaginable possibilities would apply to our world. He has, first of all, to gain experiences which will then make up his knowledge about the world. The repeated perception of sequences of events makes him infer causal connections. How are these generalizations to be justified? If we were to succeed in justifying the inference from particulars ( $p_1q_1, p_2q_2, \dots, p_nq_n$ ) to the general ('if p, then q'), we could also substantiate causal relationships.

A concrete inductive inference would be justified if it could be shown that, first, 'q' has always occurred together with 'p' in the past, and second, that the future will resemble the past. From the given premises we could then in fact conclude that 'p' will concur with 'q' in future too. But how are we to justify these premises? The first raises the problem of whether and in what way we may trust our memory. If we were to justify this premise, we would have to prove that, at least under certain circumstances, our memory does not deceive us.

Whatever proof we were to set forth, we would have to presuppose that our memory is to be trusted during this period; otherwise we could never reach the conclusion that it does not deceive us at least under certain circumstances. In other words: in the attempt to justify it we presuppose as already having been justified what we set out to justify, i.e. the reliability of our memory. If one wants to escape from this circle and to prove that the memory can be trusted during the time we were trying to demonstrate when it can be

trusted, we would once more have to presuppose that it does not deceive us. Then, however, we would have to justify this premise and so forth, ad infinitum.

But Hume said little about the problem of justifying the ideas of memory. Let us, therefore, take the most favourable case for verifying the inductive inference and assume that 'q' has always occurred together with 'p' in the past and that we have a faultless recollection of this. How, then, is it possible to justify the second premise, the 'uniformity principle'? Evidently not by appeal to experience, since it makes a prediction which cannot be supported by present experiences. Neither can the premise be justified by an activity of the intellect alone, for even in the most favourable case, i.e. if the future has always resembled the past so far, the inference: 'all our previous expectations have come true, therefore this will be so in the future too' will not become an analytic inference. Moreover, we may well visualize the negation of this inference, i.e. imagine that different conditions will hold in the future, and thus prove it to be non-contradictory, which would be impossible in the case of an analytic judgement. That the method of induction has worked so far does not imply that it will also continue to work in the future.

Given that the future has so far always resembled the past, would it not nonetheless be possible to maintain that the thesis of the uniformity of nature is more probable than its negation? Hume advances another argument which is crucial for interpreting his analysis of causation as a pyrrhonic argument. He demonstrates that past experiences cannot justify the probability of predictions, since the inference: 'the future has resembled the past so far, and since the future is like the past, the future will resemble the past'. The conclusion can only be obtained with the help of this second premise. In inductively justifying the inductive principle we justify it by presupposing its previous justification.

'Tis evident, that Adam with all his science, would never have been able to demonstrate, that the course of nature must continue uniformly the same, and that the future must be conformable to the past. What is possible can never be demonstrated to be false; and 'tis possible the course of nature may change, since we can conceive such a change. Nay, I will go farther, and assert, that he could not so much as prove by any probable arguments, that the future must be conformable to the past. All probable arguments are built on the supposition, that there is this conformity betwixt the future and the past, and therefore can never prove it. This conformity is a matter of fact, and if it must be proved, will admit of no proof but from experience. But our experience in the past can be a proof of nothing for the future, but upon a supposition, that there is a resemblance betwixt them. This therefore is a point, which can admit of no proof at all, and which we take for granted without any proof. (A15)

Past experiences thus cannot be used to support predictions, since the future is not reflected in them. If we try to do so, we step on a merry-go-round. There is no reason for supporting the prediction that the tip will necessarily resemble the whole iceberg.

##### 5. The Dilemma of the Imagination

The impact of these arguments on Hume was tremendous. For some time he seems to have lost all security amidst this realm of possibilities. In the final chapter of the epistemological part of the Treatise, he gives expression to his failure, despair and isolation:

*Every one keeps at a distance, and dreads that storm, which beats upon me from every side ... When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. (T264)*

His doubts in fact lead to a *total extinction of belief and evidence* (T183). Though Hume also in the Treatise emphasizes that he does not belong to this 'phantastical sect of the Pyrrhonians', he is ultimately ready to *throw all his books and papers into the fire* (T269) and to *reject all belief and reasoning* (T268). He regards *no opinion even as more probable or likely than another* (T268f.).

This phase of theoretical and existential forlornness, however, does not last very long:

*Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and 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. (T269)*

Experience becomes the place of refuge, nature sets up barriers against scepticism. This nevertheless leads Hume's argument into a perfect pitfall.

Hume started from the assumption that, in the creations of the scientific faculty of the imagination, we step out of the frame of the merely subjective, while in those of the metaphysical faculty we are left in the realm of subjective abstractions. After his sceptical arguments it looks as if empirical propositions are not to be justified. Aside from the short-term despair which this caused in Hume, the claims of his analysis of causal relationships have no lasting impact on daily life. We forget them and thus also the problem of inferring the future from the past. *Thus the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason* (T187). The sceptic, too, continues to believe that there are rational and irrational methods of prediction and he acts as if there were uniformity in nature. 'Forgetting', however, is one of the factors which

animates the metaphysical faculty. One of its creations is the belief in the rationality of science. For this belief in itself is not rational, it is *an illusion of the imagination* (T267). The belief in the rationality of science is a superstition. It is not the scientific, but rather the metaphysical faculty that is vitally necessary. That property of the imagination which is taken to have first given rise to metaphysics, superstition and prejudices, those *trivial suggestions of the fancy* which engender "errors, absurdities, and obscurities" in us, turns into a seemingly trivial property of the fancy (my italics) in the course of Hume's analyses. The metaphysical faculty is by no means trivial. Though Hume claims that *nothing is more dangerous...than the flights of the imagination*, this same faculty after all protects us from the consequences arising from the

*general and more establish'd properties of the imagination...For I have already shewn, that 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 save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things...* (T267f)

The attempt to prove the soundness of the belief in the rationality of science has led to the recognition of this belief as an irrational attitude. But we continue to stick to it with a tenacity that can only be due to the metaphysical faculty which makes us believe in irrational things.

The Pyrrhonic interpretation of Hume's philosophy is confirmed in these passages of the Treatise. Wherever Hume bashfully confesses to academic scepticism the context indicates that the belief in the justifiability of moderate scepticism is based on the metaphysical faculty of the imagination as well: we believe in the rationality of scientific procedure since we assume certain propositions to be more probable than

others. But as this belief is a product of the metaphysical faculty, the propositions of academic scepticism, too, rely on that faculty which makes us believe in things that do not exist at all.

While in the Treatise Hume feels increasingly compelled to recognize the influence of metaphysics, he attacks it more vehemently in the final chapter of the Enquiry. His basic thought is the same which guided him in his early work: only empirical propositions can be justified. In section X he attacks the belief in supranatural miracles, since this does not follow from a maxim, by which we commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings (E117), i.e. from causal inferences. It is

*a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle. (E115)*

While Newton and his followers proceeded from science to theology, Hume endeavoured to introduce scientific method also into the treatment of theological problems. In section XII he argues for an academic scepticism now unequivocally founded on the scientific faculty of the imagination. In the implacable final sentence of the Enquiry he is no longer ready to commit all books to the flames, but all the more determinedly those of metaphysics, since they contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

In the Treatise Hume describes the belief in the rationality of science as an illusion, as a product of the wishful thinking of fantasy. Now he claims to be able to support his basic assumption: any metaphysical proceeding is senseless since it is not able to yield objective insights.

The belief in its rationality is irrational. Has Hume abandoned his doubts of the Treatise?

The question concerning the source of errors of the mind which Hume asks in the section Of scepticism with regard to reason belongs, in fact, to the few problems which receive no further discussion later on. It is possible that he regarded his arguments in this section as untenable. But what has happened to the ontological arguments of his theory of substance which he had developed in Part IV of the Treatise? Though Hume briefly touches upon this in the final chapter of the Enquiry, he does so for the sole reason of stressing his naturalism as regards the question of the existence of an external reality. Already in the Appendix to the Treatise he emphasizes his discontent with his ontological analyses, but considers himself unable to find a more satisfactory solution. In the main texts of his early work he had already written that in this dispute on the materiality or immateriality of the soul he was prone to *absolutely condemn even the question itself* (T234). In the introductory chapter of the Enquiry he even sketches a different picture of the 'true' philosopher. The true philosopher neither drowns in the world of senses nor suffocates in the vacuous heights of the intellect. He does not attain his balance by an 'insight', but has to abstain from *abstruse thought and profound researches* (E9). With these 'abstruse thoughts' Hume, I believe, means his theory of substance, and in particular his analysis of the self.

In his late work the question of the self remains untouched, and the bundle theory developed in the Treatise is disregarded. In the Enquiry 'substances' are no longer lumped together with the other products of the metaphysical faculty of the imagination. During the course of his analysis of the self he possibly ceased to regard it as simply a metaphysical fiction as he had suggested in his bundle theory. How, at all, can that which perceives be reduced to a bundle

of perceived things? If there is no one who sees, who has perceptions, then there is nothing that is seen, and the expression 'to be perceived' becomes meaningless. If, however, there is something that is seen, there is also someone who sees it, i.e. some one who is irreducible to that which is seen: the perceiver. If this argument is sound, it follows that the consciousness of a self must always be presupposed in the process of experiencing.

Perhaps we are now able against this background to reconstruct an entire group of statements particularly from the second book of the Treatise. Hume here stresses *that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us* (T317). As the immediate object of pride and humility, for instance, Hume makes out the *self* or *that identical person, of whose thoughts, actions, and sensations we are intimately conscious* (T329). But possibly Hume might have had another way out of this difficulty of reducing the self to its empirical base. For he could have given up this parlance of the self that perceives and the objects that are perceived, and could have rejected it as a fictitious dichotomy. Then there would only remain events, the only 'valid' language being that of enumeration. One might actually be tempted to derive such a position from the monistic passages of the Treatise ('there are only perceptions'). Though Hume raised real doubts concerning these consequences of his empiricist approach, he does not believe that he is able to offer a solution to this 'aporetic' labyrinth. The proposition that we do not know more about an object than we have experienced of it seems just as plausible as the proposition that we do know more about an object beyond that we have experienced of it, since we were able to perceive it. Though we do not come across a self anywhere in the empirical description, we always presuppose it in the process of perception. After the tempestuous first book of the Treatise Hume turns his back on ontological problems and returns to the 'common way of talking'.

While, therefore, Hume no longer regards 'substances' simply as products of the metaphysical faculty of the imagination in his later works, he formulates the Pyrrhonic argumentation of his analysis of causation just as acutely in the Enquiry. At the same time he defends here a moderate academic scepticism based on causal inferences, and with the help of these he criticizes superstition and prejudices. On the strength of what considerations might belief in the rationality of science all of a sudden have become rational, the causal analysis notwithstanding?

#### 6. The Role of the Artistic Faculty of the Imagination

Beginning with the last paragraphs of the final chapter of the Treatise Hume's 'naturalistic turn' becomes apparent. In the Appendix and in the second part of Section V of the Enquiry he then explicitly claims that the belief in the uniformity of nature cannot be explained by an associationist theory. This belief *which engages animals, from every object, that strikes their senses, to infer its usual attendant, and carries their imagination, from the appearance of the one, to conceive the other, ... is the common heritage of all living beings. The belief in the uniformity of events is instinctive and not subject to our will. Nature did not give us the freedom to decide whether or not we want to believe in its constancy. Nature has not entrusted an operation of such immense consequence in life to the uncertain process of reasoning and argumentation (E106).* As in the Treatise, Hume emphasizes that the arguments of his analysis of causation do not have a lasting impact on our behaviour. In the 'naturalistic' passages he now adds that the belief in the uniformity of nature and in the rationality of the empirical procedure are natural attitudes. In the naturalism of the Enquiry the central problem of the Treatise turns out to be an irrational question: What is the use of interpreting a certain belief as a product of the scientific or the metaphysical faculty of the imagination and of interpreting

behaviour derived from it as rational or irrational, if a contrary behaviour is not possible at all? A creature convinced of the complete inconstancy of the course of nature could not survive in this world. But from this it must not be inferred that all beliefs are natural.

In the Enquiry Hume writes that the wise man

*proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full proof of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability. (E110f.)*

While in the Treatise beliefs are construed as either products of the scientific or of the metaphysical faculty of the imagination, Hume extends this dichotomy in the Enquiry. There he distinguishes between natural (instinctive), rational (justified, reasonable), and irrational (unjustified, unreasonable, Christian) convictions. While in his early work Hume concluded from the arguments of the analysis of causation that even the belief in a constant course of nature is irrational, he confines these arguments to the domain of natural belief in the Enquiry, thereby depriving them of their acuteness. The distinction between rational and irrational behaviour does not manifest itself in the assumption of a uniform course of nature, but in those questions in which we are able to decide what we ought to believe. It is on this base that Hume establishes the main pillars of his ethics of belief.<sup>7</sup>

Given the scheme of argumentation, Hume sets to work on analysing rational and irrational beliefs. In his Dialogues concerning Natural Religion he collects the best

arguments of affirmed and negative theology. Philo the Wise, however, takes his bearings from the superior arguments of a non-dogmatic scepticism. In The Natural History of Religion Hume tries to show that religious systems are secondary phenomena. They arise only under certain external conditions, which explains why it is by no means as natural to believe in the supernatural as it is to assume a constant course of nature.

But is this belief in the constancy of nature really beyond reasonable doubt and thus also beyond rational argument? Nowhere in his late work does Hume actually try to mark off as rational the belief in the rationality of science from that in its irrationality, although he does, in my opinion, give a hint as to the direction from which such an argument might be forthcoming. The Enquiry contains a pattern of argumentation which is still considerably less refined than in the early work. In connection with his fundamental thesis that all meaningful concepts are reducible to their empirical base, he writes:

*Those who would assert that this position is not universally true nor without exception, have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea, which, in their opinion, is not derived from this source. It will then be incumbent on us, if we would maintain our doctrine, to produce the impression, or lively perception, which corresponds to it. (E19f.)*

In comparison with the Treatise the context of justification seems to have changed. While in his early work Hume had tried to prove philosophical propositions, the situation in the Enquiry resembles rather that of a dialogue with an imaginary partner. He is asked to produce falsifying examples. Instead of "Which arguments are there in favour of 'p'?", the question now is: "Which arguments do you have which make me not accept 'p'?" D.G.C. MacNabb has called this method the "method of challenge."<sup>8</sup>

But is this not simply a more exceptional formulation to which no particular epistemological importance should be attached? Perhaps - unless this model of justifying philosophical propositions were to be rooted in another of Hume's fundamental insights which were of crucial importance for the understanding of his philosophy. I do in fact believe that a faculty of the imagination is, again, demonstrably involved here. Only against the background of a reconstruction of this interesting Humean consideration does his remark *that the imagination, according to my own confession, being the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy* (T225) take on meaning. Elsewhere he expresses a similar conviction: *The memory, senses, and understanding are ... all of them founded on the imagination, ...* (T265)

Already in the first part of the Treatise the artistic faculty of the imagination had a decisive function both in the context of discovery and in the context of justification. Hume interprets the creative process as a mysterious reorganisation of impressions, whereby the 'imaginability' of events becomes the criterion for the analyticity of propositions. In the subtitle of the Treatise Hume explicitly gives utterance to his intention of introducing the experimental method of reasoning into the mental sciences. 'Experiments' are artificially set up, usually substantially simplified arrangements, which are to inform us about relevant and irrelevant factors of the events. Experiments are not simply 'perceptions.' Hume, for instance, answers the question of the influence experiences have on our conception of the world by means of the Gedankenexperiment of an 'adament' situation. The faculty which makes us imagine these new possibilities by reorganizing or simplifying known experiences is, in Hume's conception, the artistic faculty of the imagination. This curious faculty becomes even more important in Hume's later writings.

Having completed the first book of the Treatise, Hume turned to the so-called practical problems of philosophy

in the following two books. His interest in moral philosophy centred on the theory of 'artificial' virtues and the question of the possibility of improving human moral sentiments. Is 'justice' an artificial or a natural virtue? Hume tries to give an answer by means of a series of thought experiments. 'Justice' turns into a useless virtue both in the Golden Age, in a state of abundance of exterior good, and in a communist utopia, in a state of extreme benevolence to others, and under the conditions of utmost misery.

*Thus, the rules of equity or justice depend entirely on the particular state and condition in which men are placed, and owe their origin and existence to that utility, which results to the public from their strict and regular observance. Reverse, in any considerable circumstance, the condition of men: Produce extreme abundance or extreme necessity: Implant in the human breast perfect moderation and humanity, or perfect rapaciousness and malice: By rendering justice totally useless, you thereby totally destroy its essence, and suspend its obligation upon mankind. (E188)*

Equally decisive is the role of fantasy in the question of the criterion used in judging the quality of works of art and of actions. Hume agrees with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson on this issue. For them this criterion is nothing but a special sentiment of approval and disapproval:

*Nor is every sentiment of pleasure or pain, which arises from characters and actions, of that peculiar kind, which makes us praise or condemn. The good qualities of an enemy are hurtful to us; but may still command our esteem and respect. (T472)*

By introducing these 'moral sentiments' Hume hopes to escape from the following difficulty: 'beautiful', 'good', in short all values, are not properties of objects.

*Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain*

passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. (T468f.)

Hume teaches here that we are only able to observe facts, but not values. Just like metaphysical concepts, the latter are irreducible to impressions, i.e. to the contents of sense perceptions. Are value concepts therefore just as hopelessly subjective as metaphysical concepts? Hume denies this because human beings are in the possession of sentiments which allow them to perceive the good and the beautiful.

But which conditions pave the way for these sentiments? Hume regards at least the two following ones as important: First, the endeavour to put oneself into the often unfamiliar situation of the other. Hume calls this ability sympathy and describes it in the following terms:

*The bare opinion of another, especially when infor'd with passion, will cause an idea of good or evil to have an influence upon us, which wou'd otherwise have been entirely neglected. This proceeds from the principle of sympathy or communication; and sympathy, as I have already observ'd, is nothing but the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination. (T427, my italics)*

Hume seems to think that, by the aid of fantasy, it is possible to put oneself in the other's position. One's own experiences, which are always the starting point, are thereby being ordered as he who is to be judged might have had them. In the case of theft these experiences may be hunger, loneliness and lack of affection. While in the first book of the Treatise, however, the ideas of the imagination cannot yet attain the vivacity of memories and experiences, in his

later writings Hume already regards it as

*certain we may feel sickness and pain from the mere force of imagination, and make a malady real by often thinking of it. But this is most remarkable in the opinions and affections; and 'tis there principally that a lively idea is converted into an impression ... This is the nature and cause of sympathy; and 'tis after this manner we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them. (T319)*

The second condition for improving upon moral sentiments is the endeavour to see oneself as one is seen by others. Hume develops this condition in connection with the following consideration: 'Sympathy' by itself cannot serve as a basis for objective judgements, since this 'compassion with the lot of others' has the decisive drawback of varying according to the intensity of the relations. *We sympathize more with persons contiguous to us, than with persons remote from us: With our acquaintance, than with strangers: With our countrymen, than with foreigners (T581).* This lack, however, may be compensated to some extent by trying to relativize one's own standpoint and by taking up the position of an 'impartial spectator.'

*When a man denominates another his enemy, his rival, his antagonist, his adversary, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of vicious or odious or depraved, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which he expects all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others; he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string to which all mankind have an accord and symphony. (E272)*

The connection of this thesis of the impartial

spectator with the phenomenon of imagination is elaborated by Hume in his brilliant essay Of the Standard of Taste (1757).<sup>9</sup> One of the reasons why many critics are unable to develop proper aesthetic and ethical sentiments may be traced to the want of that delicacy of imagination which is requisite to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions (HPW272). What Hume has in mind here is the faculty of taking up as many standpoints as possible by the aid of fantasy, so that the moral sense is able to pick out from the multiplicity of moral sentiments (which belong to the various standpoints) precisely that sentiment which ranks highest in quality.

*A critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse, 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. In like manner, when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and, considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being, and my peculiar circumstances. A person influenced by prejudice complies not with this condition; but obstinately maintains his natural position, without placing himself in that point of view, which the performance supposes. If the work be addressed to persons of a different age or nation, he makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices; but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated. If the work be executed for the public, he never sufficiently enlarges his comprehension, or forgets his interest as a friend or enemy, as a rival or commentator. By this means, his sentiments are perverted; nor have the same beauties and blemishes the same influence upon him, as if he had imposed a proper violence on his imagination, and had forgotten himself for a moment. So far his taste evidently departs from the true standard; and of consequence loses all credit and authority. (HPW276-77)*

Two years later Adam Smith, Hume's close friend, published his Theory of Moral Sentiments. This work seems to concentrate fully on the idea that the imagination has to play the central part in an ethics of moral sentiments.

In the last paragraphs an attempt was made to show that the imagination plays a decisive part in Hume's philosophy. Thereby, the artistic property of the imagination seems to attain an ever more crucial function in the course of his intellectual development. As regards the question of the role of social contact he draws up the following situation:

*Let all the powers and elements of nature conspire to serve and obey one man: Let the sun rise and set at his command: The sea and rivers roll as he pleases, and the earth furnish spontaneously whatever may be useful or agreeable to him: He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy. (T363)*

In the Abstract he introduces Adam for the first time. In the essays Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion and Of the Standard of Taste he stresses the importance of the artistic fantasy in moral debates. And for his masterpiece he chooses dialogue as a means of presentation. (In the Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals the imagination, nonetheless, has a much more subordinate function than, for example, in the third book of the Treatise. This may perhaps be due to Hume's persuasion, in his later writings on moral philosophy, that men possess a natural sympathy for each other. But if it is an innate instinct to do good to others, the demand to take up the other's place loses its purpose. On 12 August 1776 Hume wrote to his publisher: *Dear Sir, Please to make with your pen the following Correction ... erase these words, that there is such a sentiment in human nature as benevolence. This, Dear Sir, is the last Correction I shall probably trouble you with ...* <sup>10</sup> If the consideration is correct that

the role of the imagination in moral discourse is also determined by the extent to which men possess a natural sympathy for each other, Hume's correction would mean that he again attaches a more central importance to this puzzling faculty.)

Possibly the 'method of challenge' of the Enquiry may equally be interpreted as a moment of this 'more imaginative' way of treating of problems, for which Hume pleads in his later writings. But has he really tried to weigh up the assumption of the constancy of the course of nature against its negation from the perspective of an impartial spectator? I do not think so, but perhaps he has shown the way.<sup>11</sup>

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1. C.W. Hendel, Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume. (Indianapolis 1963<sup>2</sup>), p.20.
2. S. Hampshire, "Hume's Place in Philosophy," in: D.F. Pears (ed.), David Hume. (New York 1963), p.3.
3. The Treatise and the Enquiries are quoted from the editions of L.A. Selby-Bigge/P.H. Nidditch, The Abstract from the Archon Books reprint with introduction by J.M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Hamden, Conn. 1965).
4. C.V. Salmon, "The Central Problem of David Hume's Philosophy. An Essay towards a Phenomenological Interpretation of the First Book of the Treatise of Human Nature," in: Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Phänomenologische Forschung 10 (1929), p.336.

The literature known to me on the problem of the role of the imagination in Hume's philosophy is as follows: W.C. Gore, The Imagination in Spinoza and Hume. (Chicago 1902); H. Taylor, "Hume's Theory of the Imagination," in: University of Toronto Quarterly 12 (1943), p.180-90;

- E.J. Furlong, "Imagination in Hume's Treatise and Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding," in: Philosophy 36 (1961), p.62-70. These writings are extensively discussed in: J.Wilbanks, Hume's Theory of Imagination. (The Hague 1968.) Furthermore: P.F. Strawson, "Imagination and Perception," in: L.Foster/J.W. Swanson, Experience and Theory. (Cambridge, Mass. 1970), p.31-54; J.F. Bjelke, "Wirklichkeitserkenntnis und Wirklichkeit-simagination bei Hume," in: Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie 58 (1976), p. 23-29.
5. This, however, seems to be changing now. See, L.M. Russow, "Some Recent Work on Imagination," in: American Philosophical Quarterly 15/1 (1978), p.57-66.
  6. C.W. Hendel, Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume. (Indianapolis 1963<sup>2</sup>), p.25.
  7. J.A. Passmore, "Hume and the Ethics of Belief," in: G.P. Morice ed. David Hume. (Edinburgh 1977), p.77-92.
  8. D.G.C. MacNabb, David Hume. His Theory of Knowledge and Morality. (Oxford 1966<sup>2</sup>), p.18.
  9. Hume's Philosophical Works, ed. Green and Grose, reprinted (Verlag) from the London edition of 1882. Hereafter HPW. All quotations are from Vol.III.
  10. The Letters of David Hume, ed. J.Y.T. Greig. (Oxford 1932), Vol. II, #534, p.331.