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John Immerwahr

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Hume on Tranquillizing the Passions

John Immerwahr

Borrowing a fragment from the lyric poet Archilochus, Sir Isaiah Berlin once divided thinkers into two categories: foxes, who know many things; and hedgehogs, who know only one, "one big thing."¹ Although Berlin does not include Hume in either list, it is tempting to put him with the foxes. Indeed, Hume's corpus is brilliantly eclectic, ranging with equal facility over an impressive array of seemingly diverse subjects such as epistemology, ethics, political science, religion, psychology, history, criticism, economics, and demography. Many of Hume's admirers have not even attempted to find a unity here, and Hume's less generous critics have attributed this diversity to an incessant hunger for "literary fame" which supposedly led Hume from topic to topic, always searching for popular acclaim and recognition.²

The dazzling diversity of Hume's thinking has obscured some important underlying themes; Hume is more of a hedgehog than he initially appears. At the centre of many of Hume's discussions is a recurring conviction about the nature of human well-being and the means to obtain it. This insistence—which can be found in each stage of Hume's career and in writings on virtually every topic—provides one way of finding an overarching unity to his thought and invites us to rethink some of the conventional wisdom about Hume.

In this essay I argue that many of Hume's investigations are informed by his early distinction between calm and violent passions. Wherever we turn we find Hume insisting that people are happiest and governments are most stable when emotional calmness prevails. Hume also has a strategy, which I call "moderation through opposition," which is designed to "tranquillize and soften" the passions.³ This strategy also becomes a stylistic principle which informs Hume's own writing, especially his popular works.

This essay begins with a brief discussion of the calm/violent distinction itself. I then sketch out the role of calm passions in Hume's treatment of rationality, happiness, morality, politics and religion. Next I turn from Hume's diagnosis to his proposed cure, and discuss the strategy that Hume presents for enhancing the calm passions; indeed, Hume's writing style itself is often designed to implement this strategy. I then discuss the context of Hume's insight, arguing that while it grows out of a cosmopolitan continental paradigm of using

passions to oppose passions, Hume's own use of it is tailored to rather specific features of the political and intellectual life of eighteenth century Edinburgh. The essay concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for reading of Hume's works.

Passions: Calm and Violent

One characteristic feature of the thinkers of the "Scottish Enlightenment" was a desire to found moral concepts in a scientific and empirical understanding of human nature, rather than upon abstract conceptions of virtue and justice.⁴ These thinkers were particularly interested in non-cognitivist elements of human nature, such as "taste," "sentiment" and the "passions,"⁵ and they were also interested in discriminating among the feelings and passions to discover those which were most beneficial to the individual or society.

One Scottish philosopher who was particularly influential upon Hume in this connection was Francis Hutcheson. In discussing the passions, Hutcheson distinguished between what he called the "*calm desire of good*" and the "particular passions towards objects immediately presented to the senses." Hutcheson noted that these calm desires were frequently powerful enough to conquer particular passions such as "lust or revenge."⁶ The calm passions are thus very important to our understanding of human motivation.

As in so many other things, Hume also appears to be influenced by Hutcheson on the existence and importance of "calm passions." Early in *Treatise 2*, Hume expands on Hutcheson's idea that our experience of an emotion or passion can be described as either "calm" or "violent"⁷ (also "soft" or "tender," "rough" or "fierce").⁸ The main difference between calmness and violence has to do with the intensity with which a passion is experienced. When we experience violent passions we feel an "uneasiness" (T 418) and sometimes "disorders and agitations" (E 17).⁹ Other passions are "calm" in that they cause "no disorder in the soul" and "little emotion in the mind" (T 417).¹⁰ Hume's main point is that a person can be emotionally tranquil and yet be experiencing an emotion or passion (T 437).

The calm/violent distinction, according to Hume, has little to do with the strength of a passion or its power in influencing the will.¹¹ Under the right conditions, a calm passion can overpower a violent one:

Generally speaking, the violent passions have a more powerful influence on the will; tho' 'tis often found, that the calm ones, when corroborated by reflection, and seconded by resolution, are able to controul them in their most furious movements.
(T 437-38)

indeed, calm emotions can frequently have “absolute Command over the Mind. The more absolute they are, we find them to be commonly the calmer.”¹²

Hume uses the calm/violent distinction for two related purposes. Sometimes he uses calmness and violence to signify the kind of passion that is being experienced (anger, joy, hatred, etc.). In this sense, a passion such as anger is classified as “violent” because most of its expressions have a high level of emotional intensity. By contrast, he characterizes the love of beauty as a calm passion because most of its expressions are tranquil.

Hume also uses the terms “calm” and “violent” in a different sense to refer to the way passions are experienced. Almost any passion can be expressed with either a high or low emotional intensity.¹³ A violent passion (such as hatred) can be experienced calmly. Just as there is a “a calm anger or hatred,”¹⁴ the love of music and poetry can sometimes “rise to the greatest height” (T 276) and indeed a “calm passion may easily be chang’d into a violent one” (T 438). The expression “calm passion” is thus ambiguous. It can mean a passion that is usually calm (like the love of beauty) even if it is being experienced violently, or it can mean a passion that is usually violent (such as anger) that is being experienced at a low level of emotional intensity; the same holds *mutatis mutandis* for the term “violent passion.”

This ambiguity does not infect what follows. As we shall see, Hume’s real enemy is violent passions experienced violently; anything else is an improvement. For Hume the usually calm passions (such as friendship) are superior to those that are typically violent (such as animosity), and it is better to experience a violent passion calmly rather than violently.¹⁵

The Effect of Calm and Violent Passions on Human Well-being

Although the distinction between calmness and violence is originally presented as a piece of descriptive psychology, it soon becomes clear that it has a normative role for Hume. If we trace this distinction through a variety of different topics that Hume discussed throughout his works, we find that in each case human well-being is associated with dispositions and practices that produce or preserve calmness of passions. Conversely, violent passions are invariably associated with misery, political instability, and religious fanaticism.

1. Wisdom or Sagacity

Although Hume has little respect for reason (“so uncertain a guide” in human affairs),¹⁶ he sets high store by the degree of “men’s sagacity or folly” (T 492). The foolish person is the one who sacrifices long-term gain for short-term profit:

And however poets may employ their wit and eloquence, in celebrating present pleasure, and rejecting all distant views to fame, health, or fortune; it is obvious, that this practice is the source of all dissoluteness and disorder, repentance and misery. (E 239)

Hume also describes those who can resist short-run pleasures for long-term gain as having "strength of mind" (T 418).¹⁷

Hume makes it very clear that this sagacity or strength of mind is really nothing other than the "prevalence of the calm passions above the violent" (T 418). Philosophers have sometimes ascribed such wisdom to the operation of reason, but Hume tells us that this is a mistake. We only speak in terms of the "combat of passion and reason" because we do not distinguish calm passions from the operation of reason (T 413). In fact, what motivates us to act in our own long-term best interest is not reason but calm passions:

these decisions [to maximize long-term gain], though really the result of our calm passions and propensities, (for what else can pronounce any object eligible or the contrary?) are yet said, by a natural abuse of terms, to be the determinations of pure *reason* and reflection. (E 239; see also T 437, 583)

Wisdom is a quality of supreme importance to Hume, and its lack is one of the biggest problems that can affect a human being. "There is no quality in human nature," Hume writes, "which causes more fatal errors in our conduct, than that which leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value" (T 538). This fundamental characteristic is, as we have seen, defined totally in terms of domination by calm passions.

2. Happiness

There is also a close connection between the intensity of passion and human happiness or misery. Hume tells us in "The Sceptic" that the difference between happiness and misery "consists either in the *passion*, or the *enjoyment*."¹⁸ Hume's point is that happiness is a function of what we desire (the passion) and how successful we are at getting it (the enjoyment). People are unhappy either because they have inappropriate desires or because they fail to satisfy their desires at all. The calm passions are essential both to having the right desires and to satisfying desires of any kind.

For Hume, calm desires in themselves yield greater satisfaction than violent ones. People who are dominated by violent passions are

typically deprived of “all of the relish in the common occurrences of life” and are much less able to enjoy themselves than “men of cool and sedate tempers.”¹⁹ Although violent emotions can bring sharp joys, in the long run human beings are made much happier by calm passions:

To be happy, the passion must be benign and social; not rough or fierce. The affections of the latter kind are not near so agreeable to the feeling, as those of the former. Who will compare rancour and animosity, envy and revenge, to friendship, benignity, clemency, and gratitude?²⁰

The mild but steady joys of a calm emotion thus give greater happiness than the wild mood swings of more violent passions.

In addition to being more intrinsically pleasant, calm passions are also essential to the task of maximizing our long-run satisfactions. As we have seen, those who are in the grip of violent passions will not be able to resist short-run temptations. The strong-minded, by contrast, have a much better chance of successfully pursuing their own interests:

All men, it is allowed, are equally desirous of happiness; but few are successful in the pursuit: One considerable cause is the want of strength of mind [control by the calm passions], which might enable them to resist the temptation of present ease or pleasure, and carry them forward in the search of more distant profit and enjoyment. (E 239)

Calmness of passion thus makes people happy for two reasons. The calm passions themselves are more intrinsically satisfying, and people with calm passions are also more successful in obtaining the things that they want.

3. Morality

Calmness and violence also play an important role in Hume’s discussion of moral distinctions generally and in his discussion of specific virtues and vices. One of his central moral tenets is that moral distinctions are “more properly felt than judg’d of”; they are a function of the passions, in other words, rather than of reason (T 470). Significantly, moral sentiment is specifically described by Hume as a calm (“soft” and “gentle”) passion (T 470). Our ability to make moral judgements, therefore, is based on our ability to feel calm passions.

The doctrine of calm passions is also fundamental to what it means to live a virtuous life. Indeed, Hume sometimes uses the words “tender,” and “virtuous” as though they were synonymous.²¹ In his discussion of the passions in book 2 of the *Treatise*, Hume gives a list of examples of

the calm passions. This list is virtually identical with lists Hume gives of the natural virtues in book 3 of the *Treatise* ("Of Morals") and in other works on morality. Hume's list of calm passions includes, "benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such" (T 417). The list of natural virtues includes "[m]eekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, [and] equity" (T 578; see also E 178).

One natural virtue that Hume lays great stress on, for example, is that of friendship (E 178). In extolling the moral advantages of the "middle station in life," one of the strongest things Hume can say is that it provides a greater opportunity for friendship.²² Hume also makes it clear that friendship is "a calm and sedate affection."²³ As such, it is superior to love which is a "restless and impatient passion,"²⁴ characterized by "disorders and agitations" (E 17).

For Hume, wisdom, virtue and happiness are closely related. A person who is virtuous and wise will almost assuredly be happy as well.²⁵ What all of these concepts have in common is their close relationship to calmness of passion. Those who are dominated by calm passions will be virtuous (benevolent, friendly, etc.), and will be recognized as such and esteemed by the "soft" moral sentiments of others. They will also have the wisdom to pursue their own best interest. As a result, these individuals will obtain true happiness from the enjoyment of their calm passions once their desires are satisfied.

One of the most important implications of Hume's discussion of the calm passions is his emphasis on moderation. Hume is a "friend to moderation" in all things,²⁶ and moderation is best achieved when the controlling passions are calm rather than violent.

Hume's foundation of virtue and happiness on moderation and calmness of passion has deep roots in Hellenistic philosophy. As has been noticed by many scholars, Hume is deeply influenced by Cicero.²⁷ In a letter to Hutcheson, for example, Hume writes:

Upon the whole, I desire to take my Catalogue of Virtues from *Cicero's Offices*, not from the *Whole Duty of Man*. I had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings.²⁸

The position of Cicero's *De officio* is, of course, that an important part of virtue is a certain order and moderation ("*ordo et moderatio*").²⁹ In Cicero (and Hellenistic philosophy generally), Hume found a model for defining human happiness in terms of emotional tranquillity, rather than in terms of a coherence to an abstract notion of virtue.³⁰

4. Politics

So far we have focused primarily on the calm and violent passions as they play out in the lives of individuals. The passions play an equally important role in Hume's political philosophy.

Indeed, for Hume, one of the main purposes of political life is to restrain violent passions. If everyone were sufficiently endowed with calm passion ("sagacity" and "strength of mind") there would be no need for government; we could all live in a peaceful state of nature (E 205). Unfortunately, "violent passion hinders men from seeing distinctly the interest they have in an equitable behaviour towards others" (T 538). The only cure for this tendency is to institute governmental structures that will, in effect, force us to forsake short-term pleasures for long-term good. Government is, therefore, individual wisdom, virtue and happiness writ large. Government forces human beings to "seek their own advantage" (T 538) (which they would do anyway if their calm passions were in charge), and as a result "bridges are built; harbours open'd; ramparts rais'd; canals form'd" (T 539). The social contract, said Rousseau, forces us to be free; for Hume it forces us to be calm.

Even after the formation of political society, the violent passions remain a constant threat to social order. In Hume's political philosophy there is a constant tension between a desire for the common good, which Hume calls the "*party of humankind*," and the threat posed by factions and political subgroups (E 275).

Hume has nothing but contempt for factions which, if unchecked, inevitably lead to "disorder" and "tyranny."³¹ He has particularly harsh words for the founders of factions: "As much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honoured and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated."³² Hume returns to the theme of factions and parties over and over again in his *Essays*, and one of his main goals in beginning his massive *History of England* was to understand the emergence of the factions that had an influence "upon our present Affairs."³³

There is also a close relationship between violent passions in the individual and factions in the body politic. Factions as well as "popular tumults, seditions, [and] panics" are instances, for Hume, of "passions, which are shared with a multitude" where people burn with the "common blaze" (E 275). Persecutions, Hume says, "never, in any age, proceeded from calm reason ... but arose entirely from [violent] passion and prejudice" (E 134). Conversely, the best way to control factions is to calm the passions: "When the tempers of men are softened," writes Hume "factions are then less inveterate."³⁴

The connection between factions and violent passions is a vicious circle. Just as violent passions encourage factions, factions in turn breed violent passions. First, factions loosen the power of laws and

government, thereby lowering the main restraint on the violent passions that government was created to control. At the same time, factions breed fierce emotions among their own members and provoke extreme reactions among their opponents. As Hume puts it:

Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other.³⁵

Factions are thus a disease of the body politic: just as violent passions lead the individual against his or her long-term interests, factions in the state work against the common good.

The only thing that can oppose factions are the calm passions. These passions "may appear, at first sight, somewhat small and delicate," but they can be nourished so that they eventually overpower the force of the more violent passions (E 275).

5. Religion

Hume's own religious position is notoriously difficult to determine. Although Hume is devastating in his attacks on organized religion and on most theological positions, some scholars do believe that Hume adopts a minimalistic religious position which he calls "philosophical theism" and "true theism."³⁶ This position, which J. C. A. Gaskin describes as "attenuated deism," holds that the belief in God is in some sense based on our awareness of order in the universe.³⁷ As Hume writes in the introduction to the *Natural History of Religion*:

The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.³⁸

For Hume, this true theism is vastly different from the religious practices of his day, which he typically calls "popular religion" or "superstition." Hume's philosophical theism has no moral content, and is not based on revelation or miracles.³⁹ Hume's deism is monotheistic, and thus is also different from the polytheism of the ancients.

Hume's preference for philosophical theism over popular religion and polytheism is at least partially based on epistemological considerations. But there is also a passionate element here as well. Polytheism and popular religion grow out of the violent passions and are supportive of them; only philosophical theism appeals to the calm passion.

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For Hume, polytheism has no rational foundation; it is a “merely arbitrary supposition, which, even if allowed possible, must be confessed neither to be supported by probability nor necessity” (NHR 29). What then is the source of this patently absurd view? Primitive people who are unable to “anatomize nature” have no way of understanding or predicting natural events. Because of ignorance, the passions of fear and hope are roused to a state of violence which in turn leads primitive people to postulate the existence of multiple Deities.

These *unknown causes*, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence (NHR 29).

Only violent passions, then, could lead us to something as absurd as polytheism.

The monotheism of the masses has few advantages over polytheism. Popular religion, according to Hume, is also based on the most violent passions such as “madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination” and an “anxious fear of future events” (NHR 42, 65).⁴⁰ Once again there is a vicious circle. Just as popular religious sects are caused by violent passions, they in turn inflame other violent passions and actions. The worst and most dangerous factions are those that are motivated by religious zeal. “Parties of religion,” Hume writes, “are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition.”⁴¹ This is well illustrated in the *History of England* by Hume’s description of the Gunpowder plot. Hume contrasts the hitherto unimpeachable character of the conspirators with the actions that they were brought to in service of their religious faction:

It was bigotted zeal alone, the most absurd of prejudices masqued with reason, the most criminal of passions covered with the appearance of duty, which seduced them into measures, that were fatal to themselves, and had so nearly proved fatal to their country.⁴²

We can also see the operation of the passions at work in revealed religion, which is based on accounts of miracles. For Hume, the tendency to believe in miracles is rooted in “gross and vulgar passions” (E 118). The average person is compelled to believe and report the accounts of religious miracles by certain “stronger” passions (E 119). “The wise,” by contrast, tend to be sceptical of reports of miracles which typically favour the “passion of the reporter” (E 125).

The intense passions of popular religion can be contrasted to the emotional calmness of what Hume calls “true religion” (D 223). True religion is based on the observance of the “beautiful connexion” of events in the universe (NHR 42). This aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of the order of the universe is clearly a calm passion.⁴³ Philosophical theism is “calm, though obscure” (NHR 76).

Connections

Calm and violent passions reappear in all of these different realms, and are interrelated. Superstitious ignorance, for example, leads to terror and fear, which causes human unhappiness, popular religion and factions in the state. These in turn breed new violent emotions. By contrast, a calm scientific understanding of the world encourages true religion, a moderate and happy life, and public spirit in government, all of which helps check violent passions.

The chart summarizes the discussion so far. All of the characteristics on the left are associated with calm passions and are also highly desirable in Hume’s world view. Hume’s targets of attack are all associated with the violent passions:

<i>Calm Passions</i>	<i>Violent Passions</i>
Happiness	Misery
Wisdom	Folly
Virtue	Vice
Friendship	Love
Common Good	Factions
Monotheism	Polytheism
True Religion	Popular Religion

It is no secret to scholars that Hume stresses “moderation” throughout his work.⁴⁴ But focusing on the calm passions specifically rather than on a more generic idea of moderation, forces us to root our understanding of human happiness directly in Hume’s psychology of the passions. If we understand that human misery is caused by violent passions, we can look to Hume’s psychology to determine where, if at all, humans can find the cure.

From Diagnosis to Cure: Opposing Contrary Passions.

Even philosophers such as Plato might have agreed that calm passions were a key to happiness. But for Plato, the path to calmness was the subjugation of the passions to a higher element in the soul. The key

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struggle, in other words, was between passion and reason. The virtuous person is the one in whom reason gains ascendancy over passion.

Hume's own approach grows out of a tradition that goes back at least to Hobbes and Machiavelli. Instead of basing morality on higher virtue, these writers sought to ground their thinking in a realistic understanding of human nature itself. Machiavelli, for example, turns away from "imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist," in order to focus on "the effectual truth of the thing."⁴⁵

Instead of seeing moral life as a struggle between higher and lower (reason and passion), this tradition attempts to relocate moral life in the play of the passions themselves. One of the most important concepts here is the idea that undesirable passions can be controlled by playing them off against other passions.

Hume signals his relationship to this tradition in the first pages of the *Treatise* when he gives a list of philosophers—Bacon, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Butler—who have "begun to put the science of man on a new footing" (T xxi). Several of these writers specifically argued that passions can only be controlled by other passions. Bacon, for example, advises us "*to set affection against affection and to master one by another: even as we use to hunt beast with beast and fly bird with bird.*"⁴⁶ Mandeville, in his *Fable of the Bees*, showed how one particular passion (the desire for wealth) could be turned into a "publick benefit."

Hume's own thinking about the passions grows out of this tradition. He agrees that the key to human well-being is the proper functioning of the passions. Indeed, he argues that if we could change our passions at will, we could all live happy lives—"No man would ever be unhappy, could he alter his feelings."⁴⁷ Hume believes, however, that our passions are completely involuntary. We have little direct control over how we feel: a passion typically "depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure" (E 48). Our passions arise from a combination of the situations we find ourselves in and from our basic character.

Like Mandeville and Bacon, Hume believes that our passions can only be altered by other passions. "Nothing," he believes, "can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse" (T 415). Hume's prescription for attaining tranquillity in life, therefore, is to put ourselves in situations where contrary violent passions will somehow cancel themselves out, leaving the field clear for the operation of the calm passions. While the general theme of fighting passion with passion is common to a large range of Hume's predecessors and contemporaries, the details of Hume's treatment grow out of the specifics of his psychology of the passions.

Hume's position is that it is not enough to oppose contrary passions; merely opposing contrary violent passions will not automatically weaken them. Indeed, there are at least four possible outcomes of such an opposition: 1) both passions may continue to exist in alternation, 2) both may be destroyed, 3) both may remain but become united, or 4) one of the passions may increase at the expense of the other (T 441).⁴⁸ Only the second case, where both are destroyed, will accomplish the desired end. Hume analogizes the first three possibilities by comparing the mixture of two liquids.

If the objects of the contrary passions be totally different, the passions are like two opposite liquors in different bottles, which have no influence on each other [case 1]. If the objects be intimately connected, the passions are like an *alkali* and an *acid*, which, being mingled, destroy each other [case 2]. If the relation be more imperfect, and consists in the contradictory views of the same object, the passions are like oil and vinegar, which, however mingled, never perfectly unite and incorporate [case 3]. (T 443)

The last case is also explained by Hume in terms of a similar analogy. In cases where the contrary passions are of very unequal force, "the predominant passion swallows up the inferior, and converts it into itself" (T 420).

It is only in the second case, when the contrary passions "exactly rencounter" that the mind attains that "calm situation" and is left "in perfect tranquility" (T 442). Hume's example is a person who considers both the positive and negative outcomes of a single event. It is only when the passions are precisely opposed that they can destroy each other: "To excite any passion, and at the same time raise an equal share of its antagonist, is immediately to undo what was done, and must leave the mind at last perfectly calm and indifferent" (T 278).

Fighting passion with passion is thus a complicated matter. An incorrect opposition may actually strengthen the undesirable passion or leave it untouched. This comes out clearly in Hume's discussion of how society manages to channel the passion of "love of gain." Although there are many other passions contrary to the love of gain (such as benevolence) all are inappropriate for controlling it, and many of the likely oppositions are more likely to "inflamm[e] this avidity." The only way to limit this passion is by opposing it to itself, and to create situations where the love of gain itself is used to limit inappropriate acquisitiveness. (For example, society can create conditions so that it is in an individual's self-interest not to steal.) "There is no passion,

therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction" (T 492).

The only path to human happiness, then, is by restraining the violent passions, and one of the main ways to do this is to create situations where violent passions are precisely opposed to each other, like "an *alkali* and an *acid*."

The "Medicine of the Mind"⁴⁹

This strategy of creating moderation through opposing the passions becomes a stylistic principle for Hume. Many of Hume's writings, especially his more popular essays, are an attempt to put this theory of opposition of the passions into practice. They are designed to calm the passions of the readers by setting up the proper oppositions in the mind of the audience. Hume is, in his own words, "more fond of promoting moderation than zeal."⁵⁰ For him, the proper goal of popular writing is to make the readers more virtuous by "regulating" their sentiments (E 6). Borrowing a phrase from Cicero, Hume believes that philosophy can be a "medicine of the mind,"⁵¹ and a "sovereign antidote to superstition and false religion."⁵²

Hume's writings are thus rhetorical in the sense that their purpose is not only to convey information but also to have an impact on the reader.⁵³ One of the main techniques that Hume uses to enhance moderation in his readers is to display the opposition between both sides of a controversy.⁵⁴ If the readers can be made to see that each side has some merit, the result will be a softening of the passion and an opportunity for moderation:

There is not a more effectual method of promoting so good an end, than to prevent all unreasonable insult and triumph of the one party over the other, to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in all disputes, to persuade each that its antagonist may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side.⁵⁵

Hume's formula for producing moderation is remarkably similar to the example he gives in the case of passions that cancel each other. It is only when we see things as being "of a mixt nature," containing both "something adverse and something prosperous in its different circumstances," that the mind finds "perfect tranquility" (T 442).

Indeed, Hume's monumental *History of England* is in large part an effort at producing moderation by deliberately balancing the claims and counter-claims of the Whigs and Tories. Hume was so eager to balance both sides that he sometimes alternated between saying "Whig

and Tory, and Tory and Whig" in order to give each side equal precedence.⁵⁶

Hume's fondness for the dialogue form also grows out of his desire to produce moderation through opposition. One of the ways that writing can produce virtue is by "plac[ing] opposite characters in a proper context" (E 10). This can work well in a dialogue since opposing positions can be played out dramatically; as a result, "opposite sentiments, even without a decision, afford an agreeable amusement" (D 128). Predictably, Hume does not approve of the "vulgar Error"⁵⁷ of having one character in a dialogue be a straw figure; his objective is to give all the interlocutors an equal weight.⁵⁸ One place where this is particularly clear is in the set of essays on happiness ("The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic"). These four essays, as has been argued, make up an extended dialogue on the nature of happiness, where no one character fully speaks for Hume. The effect is to calm the passions by playing the various positions off against each other.⁵⁹

This opposition can have a particularly calming effect in religious matters. One of the primary objectives in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is to display the incompatibilities between various forms of religious belief. Rationalist/mystical theology is shown to be incompatible with empirical natural theology, and both are displayed as incompatible with popular religion. Furthermore, the popular religions are all displayed as incompatible with each other.⁶⁰ For Hume's readers, the message that alternative religious positions are incompatible is intended to sap the violence from *any* religious position. The objective is to take religious positions and "set them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy" (NHR 76).

Hume's scepticism also has a relationship to his strategy of opposing the passions. Indeed, seeing the connection to the doctrine of calm passions can give us some insights in this area, which Terence Penelhum has described as the "most vexed problem" in reading Hume.⁶¹ Some scholars have taken Hume's philosophy, especially his scepticism, as largely negative. For D. C. Stove, for example, Hume is one of the great "breakers" whose *forte* consists in casting doubt on accepted beliefs.⁶² Others, following in the tradition of Kemp Smith, have stressed the positive nature of Hume's thinking. Some of those who have stressed Hume's positive contributions have been puzzled by how to handle his overarching scepticism, which they see as essentially destructive. Nicholas Capaldi, for example, solves this problem by dismissing Hume's scepticism altogether as a "pretense" and as a "literary device."⁶³ Both these readings miss the deeper point that

Hume is a *positive sceptic*. Hume is a sceptic, but his scepticism is not a negative posture, but a positive contribution to human well-being.⁶⁴

One of the most important ways that scepticism has a positive impact on human life is by modifying the passions. Human beings are innately dogmatic and they are typically captured by the "violence of their affirmations" (E 161). Dogmatic philosophical systems only increase this tendency. The value of scepticism is that it sets up an opposition to our natural dogmatism and inspires us with "more modesty and reserve" (E 161).⁶⁵

In contrast to other systems, scepticism itself does not make the passions more violent; it "strikes in with no disorderly [violent] passion of the human mind" (E 40). Thus while other philosophical systems may inflame the passions, true philosophy [positive scepticism] can only calm them:

Every passion is mortified by it, except the love of truth; and that passion never is, nor can be, carried to too high a degree.
(E 41)

Hume's Scottish Audience

Hume's strategy of using philosophical writing as a tool to enhance human happiness by calming the passions makes particular sense given the audience to which his works were initially directed. Hume's work is deeply imbedded in the highly sophisticated Edinburgh world that is the heart of the "Scottish Enlightenment."⁶⁶ M. A. Box has pointed out, for example, that Hume's use of phrases like "our SCOTTISH ladies," "This city," (when he clearly means Edinburgh) and "this kingdom" (as contrasted to England) make it clear that Hume sees himself directly addressing a primarily Scottish audience.

To a remarkable degree, leadership in Scotland during the mid-eighteenth century was concentrated in a small, literary elite, which Alasdair McIntyre has characterized as one of the few examples of a true "educated public."⁶⁷ The members of this literati were bound by shared philosophical assumptions and close ties of acquaintance and kinship.⁶⁸ Because of the unique features of Scottish political history, the major centres of power in Scotland were in literary and political clubs, salons, and coffee houses (rather than in traditional power centres such as government, army or church). Nicholas Phillipson has argued that in mid-century Scotland, these societies acquire what he calls "para-parliamentary functions."⁶⁹

The target for Hume's writings was precisely this literary elite, and indeed Hume came to stand very much at the centre of this group as an arbiter of taste and intellect.⁷⁰ This was a society, in other words, where literary essays such as the type Hume wrote could have a

remarkable impact. Hume's works were designed to capture the attention of the literati and to shape their debates and discussion.

Hume's attempt to locate human well-being in moderation is particularly suited to Scottish thinking. His call for calmness and moderation of passions resonated with the thinking of the elites who were his primary audience. After the intense sectarian debates that had characterized earlier periods of Scottish intellectual history, Hume's call for moderation had a strong appeal.⁷¹ Ironically, Hume's thinking was particularly attractive to the moderate clergy who formed a major part of this intellectual elite.⁷²

Implications

Several important themes emerge from this somewhat breathless tour of Hume's philosophy. This reading suggests a fundamental unity that underlies much of what Hume was about. Although Hume's explorations take him through a wide variety of subjects, his analysis may also be read in terms of the underlying theme that calm passions are the key to human well-being.

This reading also highlights the degree to which Hume saw his work as therapeutic as well as analytic. Seen in this way, Hume is a rhetorician dedicated to producing change, rather than an abstract philosopher preoccupied with understanding. Ironically, Hume's frequently dispassionate style is intended to have an emotional impact. Taken in the larger context, we can see that Hume's balance and objectivity is part of his goal of teaching a "lesson of moderation."⁷³ His objectivity is not dispassionate, but arises out of a conviction that an even-handed presentation of a controversial issue will best help to calm the passions of the readers by setting up the proper oppositions. Even his scepticism is not only a philosophical analysis, but also one more psychological strategy for helping to "mortify all of our passions."⁷⁴

Finally, this reading suggests a reconsideration of the relationship between Hume's "abstruse" philosophical works, such as the *Treatise*, and his popular and "easy" works such as the *Essays, Moral and Political*. Although philosophers have focused on the abstruse works, almost to the point of ignoring the popular ones altogether, the easy works are, from Hume's point of view, more important. For while the abstract works describe the calm and violent passions, the easy works are intended to produce calm passions. For this reason, they deserve what Hume calls the "justest fame."

Villanova University

1. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York, 1953), 1. I am deeply indebted to Janice Kamrin for help with earlier drafts of this paper, and I am also indebted to the anonymous referee from *Eighteenth Century Studies*.
2. For references to a number of critics who see Hume's diversity as driven by his desire for literary fame, see Ernest Campbell Mossner, "Philosophy and Biography," in *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), 6-34, esp. 7-12.
3. David Hume, "The Sceptic," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, rev. ed., ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987) 177n.; and also in *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (London, 1882; reprint, Darmstadt, 1964), 3:229n. All references to the *Essays* will be taken from the Miller edition, which is the most accurate modern edition available. For convenience, page references will also be given to the appropriate page in volume 3 of Green and Grose. Citations will be given in the text as follows: M 180, GG 230, where "M" refers to Miller, and "GG" to Green and Grose.
4. Nicholas Phillipson, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge, 1981), 20.
5. For useful background on the Scottish Enlightenment, including its emphasis on passional principles such as taste and sentiment, see David Daiches, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment, 1730-1790*, ed. David Daiches, Peter Jones, and Jean Jones (Edinburgh, 1986).
6. Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), in *British Moralists*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford, 1969), 1:302-3.
7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1965), 276 (hereafter cited as "T"). All references to the *Enquiries* are from David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1972) (hereafter cited as "E").
8. Expressions such as "soft," "tender," and "agreeable" for the calm passions, and "rougher," "boisterous," and "fierce" are used in many places. See, for example, Hume's essay, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," M 6-7, GG 93-94.
9. Here Hume specifically talks about love as causing agitation and disorder, but it is also clear that love is a prime example of a violent passion; see T 276.

10. See also David Hume, "A Dissertation of the Passions," in the *Works* (above, n. 3). Hume's treatment here is not significantly different from what he says in the *Treatise*.
11. Hume's use of calm and violent, direct and indirect as a means of classifying the passions is rather controversial, and has been debated by Loeb and Árdal. See Louis E. Loeb, "Hume's Moral Sentiments and the Structure of the *Treatise*," and Páll S. Árdal, "Another Look at Hume's Account of Moral Evaluation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 15 (1977): 395-422.
12. See Letter 19 (1743), in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), 1:46 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).
13. This is all worked out very clearly in Páll S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's "Treatise"*, (Edinburgh, 1966), 94.
14. Letter 19 (1743), in *Letters*, 1:46.
15. For Hume's preference for the calm passions generally over the violent ones, see "The Sceptic," M 167, GG 220. Violent passions are clearly preferable when they are expressed with a calm intensity; anger and hatred, for example, when expressed in a low degree, deserve our "applauses," especially when compared with the intense anger we see in "the greatest part of mankind" (T 605). It is harder to determine Hume's views on the desirability of calmly expressed calm passions over violently expressed calm passions. Sometimes Hume speaks as though the best thing is to "tranquillize and soften all the passions" ("The Sceptic," M 177n, GG 229n). This seems to suggest that even the calm passions should be softened and moderated. In "The Delicacy of Taste and Passion," however, Hume suggests that a delicacy of taste (which for him means an intense experience of the calm passions) is something to be "desired and cultivated" (see M 5, GG 92).
16. "Of the Coalition of Parties," M 495, GG 466.
17. I am indebted here, and in several other places to Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1985), 136ff. Whelan's book is particularly valuable in that he draws widely on Hume's *Essays*.
18. "The Sceptic," M 167, GG 220.
19. "The Delicacy of Taste and Passion," M 4-5, GG 91.
20. "The Sceptic," M 167, GG 220. Here and elsewhere, Hume sometimes speaks of calmness and violence as a measure of the strength of a passion rather than an indication of how it is experienced. "The *passion*," he writes in "The Sceptic," "must neither be too violent nor too remiss" (M 167, GG 220). At other times Hume uses "calmness" as synonymous with "indifference" (see "Of Tragedy," M 220, GG 261; or T 278). This way of talking

- is not consistent with what he says elsewhere when he clearly distinguishes the strength of a passion from its calmness.
21. "Of Moral Prejudices," M 539.
 22. "Of the Middle Station in Life," M 547.
 23. "Of Polygamy and Divorces," M 189, GG 238.
 24. *Ibid.*, M 188, GG 238.
 25. Virtue, wisdom, and happiness are virtually interchangeable for Hume. In "Of the Middle Station in Life," for example, Hume remarks that once he has discussed the advantages of the middle station for virtue and wisdom, it is not necessary to say anything in addition about happiness (see M 551). In the allegory in "Of Impudence and Modesty," virtue and wisdom are described as "inseparable" (M 554).
 26. "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," M 15, GG 98.
 27. Hume's use of Cicero as a literary model is noted in Peter Jones, "'Art' and 'Moderation' in Hume's *Essays*," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade Robison (San Diego, 1979), 161-80, 176. See also Christine Battersby, "The *Dialogues* as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," in *McGill Hume Studies*, 239-52.
 28. Letter 13 (1739), in *Letters*, 1:34.
 29. Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Connection* (Edinburgh, 1982), 33.
 30. Hume's dependence on Hellenistic philosophy comes through in many of his earliest extant letters. See, for example, Letter 1 (1727), and Letter 3 (1734), in *Letters*, vol. 1.
 31. For Hume, "faction," "disorder," and "tyranny" are virtual synonyms; see, for example, "Of the Independency of Parliament," M 43, GG 119; and "Whether the British Government Inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," M 52, GG 126.
 32. "Of Parties in General," M 55, GG 127.
 33. Letter 78 (1752), to Adam Smith, in *Letters*, 1:168.
 34. "Of Refinement in the Arts," M 274, GG 303.
 35. "Of Parties in General," M 55, GG 127.
 36. See Donald Livingston, "Hume's Conception of True Religion," in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew et al. (Winston-Salem, 1986), 35.
 37. J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2d ed. (London, 1988), 219.
 38. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford, 1956), 21 (hereafter cited as "NHR").
 39. Hume argues that the existence of God has no implications for morality in "Of a particular Providence and of a future State"

- (E 132-48), and he argues against revealed religion in "Of Miracles" (E 109-31).
40. NHR 42, 65; see also David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis and New York, 1947), 225 (hereafter cited as "D").
 41. "Of Parties in General," M 63, GG 133. As Hume tells us in the *Dialogues*, "no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot" (D 222).
 42. David Hume, *The History of England*, ed. William B. Todd (Indianapolis, 1983), 5:31. See also NHR 49, where Hume writes that, "The several sects fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions."
 43. Insofar as natural theology appeals to an aesthetic sense of the beautiful order of the universe, it can be expected to improve our sensibility for "all of the tender and agreeable passions"; see "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," M 6, GG 93. Any truly *philosophical* approach to religion is not liable to stimulate the violent passions since, as we will see, philosophy presents us only with "mild and moderate sentiments" (T 272).
 44. See, for example, Jones, *Hume's Sentiments* (above, n. 29), 154.
 45. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago, 1985), 61.
 46. Quoted in Albert O. Hirshman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977), 22. My discussion of conflicting passions follows Hirshman closely.
 47. "The Sceptic," M 168, GG 221.
 48. In this passage, Hume is mainly talking about cases 1-3; case 4 has already been discussed at length at T 419ff. I have taken the liberty of presenting the four cases in a slightly different order than Hume's.
 49. "The Sceptic," M 169, GG 221.
 50. "That Politics can be Reduced to a Science," M 27, GG 107.
 51. Jones, *Hume's Sentiments* (above, n. 29), 33.
 52. "Of Suicide," M 577.
 53. For a detailed study of Hume as an "architect of reader experience," see Robert Ginsberg, "The Literary Structure and Strategy of Hume's Essay on the Standard of Taste," in *The Philosopher as Writer: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (London and Toronto, 1987).
 54. Eugene Miller has a nice grasp of this. In a footnote to "Of the Original Contract," he writes that "The Philosopher's task, as Hume understands it, is to serve as a mediator between contending

- parties and to promote compromise or accommodation. This is accomplished by a balanced appraisal of party controversies in which each side is led to see that its views are not completely right and that the opposing views are not completely wrong" (M 466).
55. "Of The Coalition of Parties," M 494, GG 464.
 56. Letter 93 (1754), in *Letters*, 1:189.
 57. *Letters*, 1:154.
 58. This feature of the *Dialogues* is highlighted by John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's Dialogues," *Religious Studies* 2 (1975): 1-18.
 59. See John Immerwahr, "Hume's Essays on Happiness," *Hume Studies* 15, no. 2 (November 1989): 307-24.
 60. I have defended this thesis at some length in "David Hume on Incompatible Religious Beliefs," *International Studies in Philosophy* 14 (1984). For the incompatibility of popular religions see E 121 where Hume writes that "in matters of religion, everything that is different is contrary."
 61. Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Scepticism and the *Dialogues*," in *McGill Hume Studies* (above, n. 27), 253.
 62. D. C. Stove, "Hume, Kemp Smith and Carnap," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 55 (1977): 189; quoted in David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, 1982), 7.
 63. Nicholas Capaldi, *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* (Boston, 1975), 30.
 64. Hume's positive scepticism is stressed, for example, by David Fate Norton in *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist* (above, n. 62).
 65. See S. Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion"* (Dordrecht, 1986). Tweyman emphasizes the positive character of Hume's moderate scepticism and reads this particular passage as a key to understanding the *Dialogues of Natural Religion*.
 66. While scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of the Scottish Enlightenment, there is less agreement about how to characterize it. See James Moore, "The Two Systems of Francis Hutcheson: On the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford, 1990), 37-38.
 67. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. Graham Haydon (London, 1985), 17.
 68. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1985), 27-28.
 69. Phillipson, "The Scottish Enlightenment" (above, n. 4), 31.

70. Nicholas Phillipson, "Hume as a Moralizer: A Social Historian's Perspective," in *Philosophers of the Enlightenment*, ed. S. C. Brown (Sussex, 1979), 157.
71. Daiches, "The Scottish Enlightenment" (above, n. 5), 12ff.
72. Peter Jones, "David Hume," in *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment* (above, n. 5), 45.
73. "Whether the British Government Inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," M 53, GG 126.
74. "The Sceptic," M 176, GG 228.