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Against the Spirit of Foundations: Postmodernism and David Hume¹

Zuzana Parusnikova

Introduction

David Hume lived at the very dawn of the modern age and belonged to the Scottish Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is often conceived of as the essence of modernity, thus standing in firm opposition to postmodernism. According to postmodernists, the Enlightenment ideal of a universal liberating rationality and the principle of universally shared norms of humanism have not only lost their vigour and appeal, but have proved to be oppressive and downright authoritarian. The project of the Enlightenment should thus be abandoned. And yet, despite the fact that Hume chronologically belonged to modernity, I find striking similarities between his views and postmodernism.

Over the years there have been many, typically modern, efforts to find some unity and to grasp the essence of Hume's philosophy, to provide some general interpretative angle by which it can appear as a consistent philosophical system. I want to argue that such an approach is neither necessary nor desirable because it deprives Hume's philosophy of its most appealing feature—his acceptance of and tolerance towards the irreconcilability of its sceptical and natural elements. There is no need to force Hume to fit neatly under any traditional philosophical label.² The permanent inconsistency in his 'system' resulting from his firm anti-foundationalist attitude is not a defect but instead makes his philosophy far more intriguing. The disunity which can be found in Hume's texts is also the feature bringing him close to postmodernism.

Postmodernism is a fuzzy area, difficult to approach let alone to define. It deliberately avoids defining itself and could even be seen as "the characteristic of a universe where there are no more definitions possible."³ Postmodernism is not a homogeneous stage of thinking following after modernism (as the prefix 'post' misleadingly suggests), but rather deconstructs modernity without offering a new and coherent alternative. Therefore, paradoxically, while deconstructing we have to use the vocabulary which is being deconstructed and cannot completely avoid the 'logos of the definition'.

This feature is reflected in what Derrida calls 'writing under erasure': we write and erase at the same time—since our language is constructed upon the modern logocentrism, we have no choice but to

use it. As a result, interpreting the meaning of texts, although authoritarian in its original intention, reveals the illusory character of any ultimate interpretation. Texts are viewed as mysterious and confusing labyrinths, by contrast to the modern obsession about clarity, precision, consistency and the possibility of decoding the exact, fundamental message they convey. Philosophy is no longer conceived of as a quest for foundations, and philosophical texts are looked at from a new perspective: they are rather 'misread', 'misinterpreted' or 'read on the margins' in order to paralyse the oppressive interpretations seeking some foundational interpretative principle and imposing compulsory norms of understanding.⁴

Hume's philosophy has suffered extensive abuse of this foundationalist kind. With rare exceptions (for example, Richard Popkin), most interpreters have tried to eliminate the inconsistencies and contradictions in his writings and to pigeon-hole him victoriously. But Hume has given them a hard time indeed. The reason he has been such a poser is, in my opinion, that he—like postmodernists—does not offer any foundationalist perspective. In fact, their firm anti-foundationalism makes allies of him and postmodernists.

Anti-foundationalism

For postmodernism, philosophy ceases to enjoy its traditional privilege of being a foundationalist discipline in either a metaphysical or an epistemological sense. Philosophy does not reveal any hidden depths, any deeper truths. It does not provide any unique insights guiding us beyond the immense diversity of the world towards its essential unity (metaphysics), nor does it provide any epistemological clue to the world. Philosophy is denied the function of an epistemological police organizing the world into a well-arranged, easily-surveyed picture. For postmodernists, this modern "fantasy to seize reality" and make it fully transparent and communicable is a source of terror.⁵ Postmodernism views the desire to master reality as leading to intellectual dictatorship, by eliminating the relevance and the rights of 'the other' which does not conform to modern principles and is thus downgraded in the modern hierarchy.

The theoretical core of this anti-foundationalism, in my opinion, is the poststructuralist theory of meaning, developing the structuralist view (of Saussure) that meaning is never present in the sign; meaning is always dispersed within a totality of signs and generated by a totality of unstated tactics. Structuralists deny the representational conception of meaning, arguing that meanings are not determined by their referents but are "caught up" within a relational net of meanings. The meaning of a sign is constituted by what is not present in the sign—by a structure of differences which delimit one sign from other signs. The

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The problem with Hume, to repeat Selby-Bigge, is that almost anything can be found in his philosophy; nifty quotes can be produced supporting virtually any possible interpretation. What amazes me, though, is the fact that most interpreters feel duty-bound to discover some essential, underlying unity beneath the contradiction-laden 'surface', to establish some foundation upon which Hume's philosophy is built and can be correctly understood. Not discovering such a foundation would be seen as a capitulation, a failure—theirs, or Hume's.

This ideal is superbly summarized in Miskell's review of Norton: "The real challenge for the interpreter of any major philosopher is to discover the unity, the underlying intention, behind the seemingly dissimilar or disparate aspects of his work."³¹ Miskell presents the modern attitude in a nutshell—its obsession with clarity and the transparency of texts and with decoding their exact meanings, its quest for some univocal message (philosophical) texts convey. In the modern perspective, such texts are compulsorily seen as consistent systems in which various aspects can be regimented and hierarchized, where some foundational principles can be found and 'the other' is viewed as marginal for the appropriate understanding of these texts.

For postmodernism, these features are symptomatic of modern logocentrism, centred around such concepts as clarity, unity, logos, reason, progress, hierarchy, stability, centralism, teleology, and so on. The "fantasy to seize reality" corresponds to the fantasy to master texts. This is shown to be an illusion, according to the poststructuralist conception of elusive meaning. Therefore, postmodernism rather makes merry with texts in order to disturb and destabilize them. Reading on the margins of texts, we pick up metaphors, allusions and footnotes, focusing on 'the other' which has been overlooked as irrelevant.

In this paper I do not attempt to deconstruct Hume in this way. What I want to do, however, is to cast doubts on the prevailing 'regimenting' treatment of Hume's philosophy. In my view, Hume does not fit into any neat interpretative framework or model; instead, he should be viewed as a radical non-foundationalist.

This can most clearly be seen in the ambiguity with which Hume treats the relation between reason and nature. On the one hand, he asserts that we "must yield to the current of nature"³² and that after experiencing the "dreary solitudes, and rough passages" (T 270) we see that rational reflection is just "an abuse of time" (T 270), and therefore "nature ... cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium" (T 269). On the other hand, he observes, "as a philosopher ... I want to learn the foundation of this [inductive] inference" (E 38), and because "'tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts,

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meaning of a sign appears against the background of what the sign is not, in a negative way. In Derrida's terminology, *the meaning of a sign is determined by a trace of that other which is forever absent*. Meaning is forever escaping being fully grasped because there is no transcendental signified which could provide a foundation for other meanings. In other words, meaning is always deferred without ever being completed.

This is the core of Derrida's concept of *difference*; it 'means' both to differ and to defer:

To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into a play of difference which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a centre the movement and textual spacing of differences.⁶

The process of tracing clarity is futile; we are locked in a labyrinth of interrelated meanings and no 'Archimedean' fulcrum point can ever be achieved. In this way, postmodernists try to free the disruptive potential of texts, to "bring to light the suppressed surpluses of rhetorical meaning in philosophical and scientific texts—against their manifest meaning."⁷ In the process of deconstruction, as carried out by Derrida, the idea that texts can be decoded and mastered is shown to be an illusion. Texts are mysterious labyrinths into which we are drawn; images of the world as a labyrinth or as a library are popular in postmodern circles. Borges' story, "The Library of Babel," provides an excellent picture of such a world:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. ... The Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.⁸

How, then, does Hume fit into this picture? At first glance, not particularly well. He did not set out deliberately to deconstruct modernity. He is not concerned with texts. He would not dream of writing about slippages of signifieds under signifiers, or floating meanings. For him the problem for philosophy is not textual but empirical. Further, his critique of metaphysics is not sufficiently anti-foundationalist to qualify him as a postmodernist; Descartes or Kant, for instance, also 'deconstructed' the old scholastics, though they replaced it with a new epistemological foundationalist alternatives. Finally, the undisciplined, unsystematic form of Hume's writings is not

a sufficient argument in favour of his link to postmodernism. But as will be argued later, what makes him a postmodernist at heart is *his determination not to offer any convenient way out of scepticism and, as a consequence, not to offer any neat philosophical 'package'*. Hume's scepticism, despite all compromising efforts (sometimes by Hume himself) to present it as a tamed, refined 'true' scepticism, does not just amount to a methodological exercise helping us to avoid uncritical attitudes. In his time, he himself must have been disconcerted about the exceedingly radical implications of his scepticism. However, he always managed to resist the temptation to establish some reassuring foundationalist position which would enable us to ground and legitimate our knowledge and behaviour.

As is well known, if we proceed from the central thesis of Hume's philosophy that we can know only what we perceive, we are drawn to extremely sceptical conclusions concerning the legitimacy of our knowledge. Under close inspection, it becomes apparent that knowledge is not possible without some assumptions which are not empirical—the concepts of necessary connection between events, or of the distinct, independent existence of our perceptions. By reasoning alone, then, we cannot justify our knowledge and show that it is legitimate. But the crucial question is whether Hume's conception of human nature can provide reliable foundations for our knowledge after reason alone proved incapable of doing so.

The answer to this problem, I think, is negative. Human nature (instincts, feelings, common-sense) does not offer a new Clue to understanding the world and does not play the role of forming alternative foundations of knowledge. The subtle relation between reason and nature should not be viewed in terms of the substantial victory of nature, allocating sceptical reason to an appropriately limited, slightly disturbing—but not damaging—position. It seems to me that Hume's writings reveal a permanent dual perspective, without any final reconciliation between reason and nature being possible.

This issue has been debated vigorously and Hume still appears as an intriguing puzzle to many philosophers. To me, the intriguing thing is that, despite differences in the analysis of particular aspects of Hume's philosophy, most English-speaking interpreters follow a curiously similar pattern. It goes as follows:

Step one: Acknowledging the difficulty of dealing with Hume's philosophy. Inconsistencies in his views are displayed, often accompanied by the famous Selby-Bigge quote:

[Hume] says so many different things in so many different ways and different connexions, and with so much indifference to what he has said before, that it is very hard to say positively

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that he taught, or did not teach, this or that particular doctrine. ... [I]t [is] easy to find all philosophies in Hume, or, by setting up one statement against another, none at all.⁹

Echoing Selby-Bigge, Hume scholars sigh about “Hume’s unusually loose and inconsistent manner of expressing himself,”¹⁰ complain about Hume’s “flagrant and fundamental inconsistency,”¹¹ and the “insensitivity to consistency which Hume shares with Locke.”¹² So it seems that “we have a genuine philosophical mystery on our hands.”¹³

Step two: Two main lines of interpretation are shown not to be credible any longer. These are, of course, the sceptical (Reid) and naturalist (Kemp-Smith) lines. Some philosophers still favour the naturalist interpretation,¹⁴ but most claim that neither position does Hume justice. What is needed, it is argued, is a more sophisticated understanding of Hume, taking into account the complexity of his thought. Thus, the aim is “to place this debate in a broader and more rewarding context.”¹⁵

Step three: Deeper insights into Hume’s thought are offered and a new and more intricate unity within it is found. Usually scholars do not want to downgrade either Hume’s scepticism or his naturalism, but prefer to keep a bit (the best) of both. And they stress that it is vital to have them united and to present Hume’s philosophy as a consistent whole.

As a result, the claims are made that although “his ‘slips’ are of gigantic proportions ... there is a unity in [Hume’s] work,”¹⁶ that “[i]n contrast to these one-sided interpretations I argue that Hume was both sceptic and nonsceptic,”¹⁷ or that “the relation between reason and natural belief is a complicated, dialectical one.”¹⁸ A rare exception among these authorities is Popkin, who (as discussed later) does not want to achieve a unity at any cost. But even Fogelin, who draws on Popkin, argues that “I do not think that any interpreter has seen how various major themes [in the *Treatise*] fit together to form a coherent whole.”¹⁹

Step four: Developing a full picture of ‘Hume as a whole’; a detailed account of the unity of Hume’s thought is triumphantly provided. Here, of course, different analyses vary, but in the end, I cannot avoid suspecting that most of them offer the same conclusion (albeit in different guises), by which the unity of Hume’s thought is presented as *moderate, tamed, refined, Academic, or mitigated scepticism located within spontaneous naturalism*. This is done with a sigh of relief, as if to say; ‘Good lad, he got it right eventually’. Both naturalism and scepticism are preserved and shown to hold together. Thus, scepticism is saved but disciplined; instead of a purely damaging role, it rather has a positive methodological function, calming down

excessive enthusiasm and correcting (not creating) beliefs. We end up with an idyllic picture of harmony and friendly coexistence between naturalism and scepticism.

For example, Flew argues that despite flagrant inconsistencies in Hume's work, "there is no direct inconsistency"²⁰ if we consider mitigated scepticism as "fit philosophical foundation for the moral sciences."²¹ According to Passmore, "What we need is a theory with enough of Pyrrhonism in it to preserve us from dogmatism, but not enough to drive us into inaction";²² this theory is, of course, mitigated scepticism. For Norton, the unity of Hume's thought takes the form of "mitigated naturalism as the complement of his [Hume's] mitigated scepticism";²³ this enables us to show that "beliefs do not depend directly upon reason"²⁴ but to maintain that "reflective reason ... can become a factor in the shaping of beliefs that are more refined and more accurate."²⁵

But Livingston holds the lead in complexity concerning the mutual relation of scepticism and naturalism. He develops an immensely sophisticated theory of their dialectical unity; according to this theory, we are advised to abandon the autonomy principle which leads to absurdity because it alienates us from the sphere of common life.²⁶ Only when we come to understand that philosophy must begin *within* the framework of common life, do we become true philosophers. Despite all the complexity, his view of Hume arrives, finally, at mitigated scepticism operating under the protective wings of common life, that is "an order of passion, prejudice, custom, traditions,"²⁷ an order of naturally adopted attitudes and beliefs. The 'Pyrrhonian illumination' thus wakes us from a dogmatic slumber, and (Livingston refers to the *Enquiry*) "would naturally inspire [dogmatists] with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves and their prejudice against antagonists" (E 161).

Livingston acknowledges in his "Introduction" that, "More than any other philosopher, Hume has appeared as the construct of the conceptual frameworks that interpreters have imposed on him."²⁸ However, his own dialectical transcendental perspective is way ahead of all previous constructions. Hume is supposed to have intended to show that true philosophy presupposes the authority of common life as a whole and cannot step beyond it; at the same time, scepticism is internal to true philosophy and the "philosopher exists both within and without the world of common life."²⁹ The autonomy principle must be abandoned, but "a reformed version of the autonomy principle survives,"³⁰ which consists in criticizing particular judgements, not doubting the whole order. Dialectics, probably, still has magic powers to embrace all phenomena, even if they seem inconsistent on the surface, and display their fundamental unity.

in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action" (T 271), "This sceptical doubt, ... is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd" (T 218). Hume does not advance any meta-theory uniting the sceptical and natural perspectives; neither can be made into a foundation for explaining the other, or for grounding our complex attitudes towards the world.

This anti-foundationalist picture of Hume was suggested partly by Fogelin, but mostly by Popkin, to whom I am greatly indebted. Their arguments stress the dual perspective: although both reason and nature have different, often contradictory, views on the same issues, they use different means of expression—different languages, or vocabularies. Nature and reason cannot convince each other in their own domains because *reason uses arguments while nature uses instincts*. Their respective vocabularies are not mutually translatable. Thus nature, lacking the power of arguments, can never *solve* sceptical doubts; she only makes us *ignore* them in our spontaneous cognitive and behavioural attitudes to the world.

Fogelin argues that there is no great merit in struggling to put together mitigated ("milk-and-water") scepticism and naturalism; "an alliance between probabilism and naturalism needs no explanation."³³ He wants to demonstrate the presence of both Pyrrhonian ("theoretical") scepticism and the naturalistic program in Hume's philosophy. While "logical (or epistemological) issues that philosophers have discussed admit of no solution,"³⁴ we nonetheless find ourselves ending up in mitigated scepticism.³⁵ Mitigated scepticism is not supported by any argument, he claims, it is just a fact of life which is being observed. But Fogelin, in my view, pushes too strongly for a fine balance between the two extreme positions, Pyrrhonism and naturalism. They are allowed to 'live' in harmony; Fogelin defends the view that "Hume's naturalism and skepticism are mutually supportive."³⁶

This step, I think, is a result of modernist prejudice. By contrast, Popkin goes much further and retains the view that there is a permanent dichotomy in Hume's treatment of reason and instinct. Pyrrhonism, he argues, is both irrefutable and unbelievable.³⁷ Natural instincts are theoretically uncertified, but are vital for our survival: "If the sceptic is really sincere, Hume maintained, he will soon cease bothering anyone."³⁸ In our lives and thoughts, then, we are confronted with this dichotomy: natural instincts are essential, but reason, doubting them, is irrefutable.

Popkin does not leap to a sudden victorious discovery of an essential unity 'beneath' this dichotomy; to him, these are "insoluble difficulties"³⁹ and "any 'honest' philosopher would be this sort of schizophrenic Pyrrhonist."⁴⁰ For Popkin, this stance represents total

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Pyrrhonism, more so than the original Greek version. The original Pyrrhonism insisted *dogmatically* on suspending judgements on *all* questions, thus preventing us, in an authoritarian way, from undertaking any action. Hume is more tolerant of inconsistencies, not insisting that people should live their lives according to philosophical scepticism. Hume's model of a true sceptic, according to Popkin, is a split, schizophrenic personality and not, as Fogelin claims, a coherent one.

On this point, I agree with Popkin. Hume develops a strategy of alternately hiding and exposing one of these aspects, sceptical and natural. We happily follow our natural instincts, the argument goes, until we start reflecting upon them. Then, although we do not stop obeying nature, we become aware of and worried about the disharmony between reason and nature, and feel torn between their powers. Sceptical doubts can be set aside, not by any rational explanation, but by "[c]arelessness and in-attention alone" (T 218). True, nature cures us, but it does so by "relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation" (T 269). The remedy which nature offers consists in our *ignoring, forgetting and suspending* what reason whispers to us. The disconcerting whisper of reason, however, is not silenced forever, and every now and then disturbs us again. This is a continually dual perspective: whatever we think, we will follow natural instincts in our behaviour, but however reliable these instincts may prove, we cannot avoid nurturing sceptical doubts about their legitimacy. "Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses" (T 231).

Common-life

As Hume himself acknowledges, common-life is the "true and proper province" (E 103) of philosophy. Common-life is a broad topic for him, including the vast variety in which human nature displays itself. The study of common-life implies that we draw our attention to the various spheres in which people relate to each other, either individually or socially. Thus, Hume directed his interest toward moral issues, religion, economics, politics, history. It is true that this approach was common among his predecessors and contemporaries: Bacon, for instance, wrote essays and social utopias, Locke analysed the functioning of modern society. However, Hume devoted himself to social and political issues on a much bigger scale; in the Catalogue of the British Library, for example, he is listed as an historian, while he also made important contributions to the emergence of modern economic thought.

I am not claiming that Hume's views concerning the sphere of common-life are postmodern. He was not a one hundred percent postmodernist; nobody is. But still, there are interesting aspects to

consider regarding his affinity with postmodernism in this area. At the very least, his views about common-life seem to cause similar confusion to his views concerning understanding. Sometimes he is taken as a forerunner of conservatism,⁴¹ or even as a Hayekian conservative,⁴² but Hayek himself regards Hume as a liberal and a Whig supporter,⁴³ while in Miller's study Hume is presented as a liberal-conservative with the conservative flavour fractionally stronger.⁴⁴

More important, though, is the fact that Hume turned away from philosophy to more practical issues. This turn reflects his philosophical anti-foundationalism. To him, philosophy cannot serve as a positive theoretical foundation for other sciences. It loses any territory of its own and cannot be regarded as having any specific, unique role. This view coincides with the postmodern view about philosophy; as expressed by Rorty:

To drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well would be to drop the notion that his voice always has an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation. It would also be to drop the notion that there is something called 'philosophical method' or 'philosophical technique' or 'the philosophical point of view'.⁴⁵

This denial questions any meaningful role for philosophy and its status as an independent discipline. Rorty himself, however, does not follow this radical advice; I would rather say that postmodern philosophy carries out the negative task of showing its own uselessness in contrast to the conventional views. Here, I think, Hume also can be shown to be a negative philosopher. In his view, philosophy makes us aware of the limits and imperfections of our reason, and after that, there is nothing else positive it can say.

Thus for Hume, as well as for postmodernists, philosophy effectively dissolves into social, political and historical studies without these being underpinned by any consistent philosophical doctrine. Such studies also encourage a pluralistic stance as the complexity of the world they deal with is not hooked onto any general unifying principle. None of these disciplines produces any normative instructions or Great Wisdom; the only moral for us to remember is that our reason is a "leaky weather-beaten vessel" (T 263) incapable of legitimating itself. With such poor equipment we cannot claim the right to 'teach and preach'; all we can do is "observe what is commonly done" (T 268).

The emphases on observation and anti-normativism, together with the element of irony and playfulness in intellectual work, brings Hume

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quite close to postmodernism. For postmodernism, if a theory is too dry and serious it becomes also boring and uninteresting. If it relies on philosophical principles it becomes dangerous and oppressive. What Hume shares with postmodernism is not the conception of a theory as an intellectual game, but the rejection of philosophy as a basis for politics.

Hume, too, is concerned about the fanaticism a 'philosophical politics' can yield, and about the false, illusory foundations it purports to provide. Instead, Hume suggests a modest evolutionary social model via gradual institutional reforms. On this point, he would not fit into the postmodern approach; he certainly believed in progress and the continual realization of the ideals of liberty and justice. His evolutionary model resembles Popperian piecemeal social engineering rather than the postmodern view that history has no direction,⁴⁶ while Hume shares with Popper the faith in certain 'Enlightenment' values (liberty, justice) and their piecemeal materialization. Notwithstanding the differences between these two philosophers and postmodernism, however, all refuse to accept that there can be any teleological foundation for their views.

The crucial question concerning any potential similarity between postmodernism and Hume's conception of common-life, however, arises precisely from the fact that Hume characterizes life as *common*; people share certain patterns of behaviour in the area of social life. They have in common certain norms, values and interests. Just as we form habits necessary for our biological survival, so we obey certain general rules in order to ensure our social survival.

Hume's treatment of these problems appears, yet again, to be somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he argues that people tend spontaneously to pursue their particular or individual interests. This approach, according to Hume, is deeply rooted in human nature:

If we consider the ordinary course of human actions, we shall find, that the mind restrains not itself by any general and universal rules; but acts on most occasions as it is determin'd by its present motives and inclination. (T 531)

On the other hand, society could not exist and function if human egoism was the sole basis of social action. That would lead to anarchy and result in a disintegration of any social structure. As Hume puts it:

But 'tis easy to observe, that this wou'd produce an infinite confusion in human society, and that the avidity and partiality of men wou'd quickly bring disorder into the world, if not restrain'd by some general and inflexible principles. (T 532)

Does this mean, then, that our acceptance of general principles is regarded as *unnatural*? Quite a few of Hume's statements on this matter indicate that the obligation to obey general rules violates our natural inclinations. Hume claims, for instance, that "the laws of justice, being universal and perfectly inflexible, can never be deriv'd from nature" (T 532) and that "[t]hese rules, then, are artificially invented for a certain purpose, and are contrary to the common principles of human nature" (T 532-33).

At the same time, Hume acknowledges that men can only exist within a society—"Society is absolutely necessary for the well-being of men" (T 526)—and it is thus necessary to create conditions in which society can develop. This involves, of course, some compromise between our individual interests and concern for the society as a whole. Men have to adopt certain conventions which would co-ordinate their actions and certain laws which will ensure order and stability in a society. Hume describes this necessity using the metaphor of a boat: "Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other" (T 490). Although the acceptance of general rules is achieved by convention, that is, artificially, the fact that the existence of a society is necessary for our survival makes it possible for Hume to argue that "there is a principle of *human nature* [emphasis added] which we have frequently taken notice of, that men are mightily addicted to *general rules*" (T 551).

There seems to be a tension between the two 'natural' inclinations, to pursue particular interests and to care about the society as a whole. From a utilitarian point of view it is obvious that

this interest, which all men have in the upholding of society, and the observation of the rules of justice, is great, so is it palpable and evident, even to the most rude and uncultivated of human race. (T 534)

But, on the other hand, it is equally obvious that, "Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures" (T 537).

Where, then, does this description leave us with regard to any possible link between Hume and postmodernism? Well, Hume's emphasis on men's *natural* addiction to universal, inflexible rules stands in total opposition to the postmodern approach emphasizing diversity, locality and the untranslatability of different life-forms.

According to postmodernism, universal rules act oppressively; their enforcement violates the *natural* and *actual* diversity of 'common-life'. By imposing universal norms, the rights of and space for

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the marginal and particular are neglected. Postmodernism attacks the traditional justification of this neglect as founded on some 'Grand meta-narrative'⁴⁷ which under false pretences directs historical development towards a particular goal and dictates general rules which must be obeyed. This teleology results in the terror of universality, typical for modern ideology. Instead, postmodernism views our world as fragmented into many isolated worlds; it is a collage, a pastiche of elements randomly grouped in a plurality of local discourses (life-forms) which *need not* be unified by any meta-narrative. This approach is nicely summarized by Bauman:

It is a new cultural experience ... which has been distilled in the postmodern view of the world as a self-constituting and self-propelling process, determined by nothing but its own momentum, subject to no overall plan. ... [T]he postmodern perspective reveals the world as composed of an indefinite number of meaning-generating agencies, all relatively self-sustained and autonomous, all subject to their own respective logics and armed with their own facilities of truth validation.⁴⁸

In this light, it seems as though Hume and postmodernism have little in common as far as common-life is concerned. However, one must be careful about making such comparisons across centuries, especially in the area of social life. Hume lived in a completely different historical situation and responded to the social problems of his time.

Unlike today, it seems Hume's eighteenth century world was experienced as a fairly homogeneous, European cultural space, while there was a generally shared set of values, belonging to the 'family' of Enlightenment ideals. History was seen as a progressive process of emancipation of mankind from superstition and metaphysical darkness. Knowledge (science) was considered to be the main tool of this emancipation and the cognitive, 'enlightened' subject was confident to carry out this task. All Hume's reflections on the problem of the particular versus the universal are rooted within this spiritual framework and this historical situation. His emphasis on the necessity of general rules makes a simple utilitarian point, that a society must be based on a system of justice whereby laws apply equally to all members of the society. This fact would not be disputed by postmodernism either.

Correspondingly, Hume's emphasis on men's natural particularity cannot be directly interpreted as the postmodern concern about the rights of 'the other', of the marginal and local. Postmodernism, unlike Hume, addresses these problems in an historical condition typical of a

massive transformation of space and time. Factors like universally transmitted information, rapid intercontinental travel and the formation of a single world economy make the world a single complex whole, facing global problems. On the other hand, the mingling and continual interaction of various cultures and traditions brings up the problems of the heterogeneity of the world and the coexistence of various local discourses in a new perspective, different from Hume's.

But despite their fundamentally different historical situations, Hume can still be regarded as firmly on the path towards postmodernism. Hume justifies the universal validity and acceptance of certain rules by the utilitarian necessity for human survival and the smooth functioning of a society. He does not support this position by any normative principle, or by any metaphysical teleology. There is no philosophical obstacle to the acceptance of diversity—or even incompatibility—in his 'system', provided such diversity does not pose any threat to the existence of stable social and political arrangements. Once we observe that heterogeneous elements *can and do coexist* without causing the total disintegration of a social structure, we are left with no argument for the condemnation of such a situation. Hume's rejection of any philosophical normativism in politics and social science makes it easy to cross the borderline between utilitarian (empirical) universalism and the postmodern tolerance of incompatibility.

It is clear that Hume himself does not make this step, rooted firmly, as he was, in the context of Enlightenment thinking. So we are left with an ambiguous picture. On one hand, there is Hume's faith in progress and universal humanity, combined with their down-to-earth justification. On the other hand, Hume's anti-foundationalism and anti-normativism potentially opened the door to undermining these very ideals. As long as, from the utility point of view, social heterogeneity does not negatively affect social functions, there are no grounds for condemning it. This I view as a potential postmodern ingredient in Hume's social and political thought. It is also reflected in Hume's tolerance towards differences and disagreements on the philosophical field:

If the reader finds himself in the same easy disposition, let him follow me in my future speculations. If not, let him follow his own inclination, and wait the returns of application and good humour. (T 273)

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1. I would like to thank the Karl-Popper-Stiftung for research support, and Donald Gillies and Terence Moll for helpful comments.
2. Passmore makes a similar point in his concluding chapter assessing Hume's achievement, claiming that Hume's philosophy "will not fit neatly with any of the ordinary categories. He is pre-eminently a breaker of new ground. ... [T]o be a Humean, precisely, is to take no system as final, nothing as ultimate except the spirit of enquiry." However, as discussed later, he only rejects 'simplifying' categories and tries to present Hume as a coherent, systematic philosopher. See J. A. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (Cambridge, 1952), 159.
3. Z. Bauman, review of *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, by D. Kellner, *Sociology* 24, no. 4 (1990): 697.
4. I discuss this approach at lengths in Z. Parusnikova, "Is a Postmodern Philosophy of Science Possible?" *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 23, no. 1 (1992): 21-37.
5. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, 1984), 81-82.
6. J. Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago, 1982), 14.
7. J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1990), 191.
8. J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979), 78-79.
9. L. A. Selby-Bigge, "Introduction," in David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1979), vii (hereafter cited as "E").
10. D. W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London, 1984), 35.
11. A. Flew, *David Hume, Philosopher of Moral Sciences* (Oxford, 1986), 119.
12. Passmore (above, n. 2), 93.
13. R. H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego, 1980), 267.
14. B. Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977).
15. D. F. Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1982), 8.
16. Passmore (above, n. 2), 2.
17. Norton (above, n. 15), ix.
18. Livingston (above, n. 10), 27.
19. R. J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the "Treatise of Human Nature"* (London, 1985), 38.
20. Flew (above, n. 11), 117.

21. Ibid., 119.
22. Passmore (above, n. 2), 150.
23. Norton (above, n. 15), 235.
24. Ibid., 237.
25. Ibid., 238.
26. The autonomy principle makes us expose all our beliefs to a severe philosophical scepticism which is the only, autonomous criterion for assessing them, and "according to this principle, philosophy has an authority to command belief and judgement independent of the unreflectively received beliefs, customs, and prejudices of common life." Livingston (above, n. 10), 3.
27. Livingston (above, n. 10), 31.
28. Ibid., 1.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. Ibid.
31. T. A. Miskell, review of *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralism, Sceptical Metaphysician*, by D. F. Norton, *Hume Studies* 10, no. 2 (November 1984): 181-93. Even Norton's 'modest' argument, that in Hume's philosophy mitigated scepticism and mitigated naturalism coexist peacefully, is criticized for presenting Hume as a philosopher of disunity!
32. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1981), 269 (hereafter cited as "T").
33. Fogelin (above, n. 19), 146.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 150.
36. Ibid., 146.
37. Popkin (above, n. 13), 144-45.
38. Ibid., 125.
39. Ibid., 132.
40. Ibid., 132n.
41. Livingston (above, n. 10); esp. chap. 12.
42. Flew (above, n. 11), 173.
43. F. A. Hayek, "The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume," in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell (London, 1968), 340.
44. D. Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford, 1981). Miller argues that before the French Revolution, the liberal ideal of personal freedom and the conservative concern about institutional continuity did not have to be in opposition. However, Hume inclined rather towards the stability element; for him "liberty is the jam, security the bread" (p. 195). After the French Revolution, Miller claims, Hume would become a 'pure' conservative.

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45. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, 1980), 392.
46. Popper's conception of piecemeal social engineering is presented most systematically in his *Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. A piecemeal engineer works by the method of step-by-step social reconstruction, while an utopian 'engineer' favours long-term historical prophecies and sweeping social change.
47. This term is used by Lyotard (above, n. 5) to describe typical features of a modern discourse. He claims that modern discourse makes "an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (p. xxiii), while, "[s]implifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives" (p. xxiv).
48. Z. Bauman, "Sociology and Postmodernity," *Sociological Review* 36 (1988): 799.