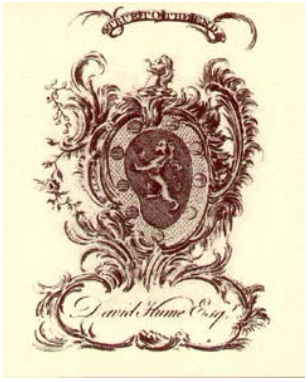

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The Notion of Moral Progress in Hume's Philosophy: Does Hume Have a Theory of Moral Progress?

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The notion of progress, and especially moral progress, is at the heart of reflections about human nature in the eighteenth century.[1] As a philosopher of the Enlightenment, one would have thought Hume would have proposed an account of this issue. But prima facie, it appears hard to relate the notion of moral progress to Hume's philosophy: firstly because it does not appear explicitly in his corpus; and secondly, and more importantly, because it seems to raise two major difficulties with respect to his moral philosophy.

The first difficulty is that, according to Hume, moral judgments are not based on reason but on sentiments: "The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character."[2] Therefore, contrary to the common understanding of the concept of "enlightenment," the enlightened moral point of view is not at first sight enlightened by any knowledge of the object of judgment.

> The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation. (T 468–469)

The second difficulty is that the notion of moral progress seems to lead to a contradiction. It needs to be supported by the conception of a universal, or at least uniform, human nature: if the principles of human nature were to be

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relative to particular circumstances, any moral judgment about history or actions belonging to different situations would be rendered illegitimate. But the requirement of the uniformity of human nature then seems to leave no room for the possibility of improvement, which is also required in order to support a theory of progress.

I intend to endorse the claim that Hume's theory can avoid these difficulties by holding that the principles of human nature are in themselves uniform, but that their practical realization differs according to particular circumstances. Therefore, his philosophy can support a theory of moral progress by reconciling two apparently contradictory requirements:

1. Human nature must in some way be uniform to allow the possibility of moral judgments by independent spectators.
2. Human nature should not be immutable to allow the possibility of progress in general, and of a progress in morals in particular.

Moreover, to support a theory of moral progress that is both self-consistent and consistent with the rest of his philosophy, I think Hume has to fulfill three further conditions :

1. Different situations and circumstances influence the application of moral principles.
2. Moral judgments are the objects of a moral taste that is educated and improved by experience.
3. The progress of civilization has an influence on the morality of the people.

I aim to show that Hume fulfills these requirements and that he advocates a moral philosophy which permits the notion of moral progress. The key to the problem will be clearly to distinguish between human nature considered as a "body of principles" that is common to all human beings, and human nature as malleable and influenced by society and political structures (what we could call the "social nature" of human beings). I intend to argue that even though the issue of moral progress is not examined as such, Hume was concerned with the question so far as it was essentially related to his conception of the progress of civilization in general, and of the improvement of political institutions in particular.

1. The Universality of Moral Principles

One of Hume's objectives is to isolate the principles that govern human morality. By an empirical methodology, he tries to reject all the contingencies and select only the similarities between different moral behaviors.

> By means of this guide [the principles of human nature], we mount up to the knowledge of men's inclinations and motives, from their actions, expressions, and even gestures, and again, descend to the interpretation of their actions from our knowledge of their motives and inclinations. The general observations, treasured up by a course of experience, give us the clue of human nature, and teach us to unravel all its intricacies.[3]

By a close observation of human transactions, Hume plans to isolate whatever mental qualities account for personal merit and thus to discover their similarities. He follows the method of experimental reasoning and infers general maxims from particular instances: he inquires into the principles of morals, an activity which is different from erecting a system of morals. Therefore, his moral philosophy is primarily descriptive, not prescriptive. This method leads him to the discovery of the principle of morals: the sentiment of pleasure and pain, which expresses moral approval and disapproval and stems from the usefulness and the agreeableness of an action or a character: "the distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character" (T 546).

According to Hume, this principle is universal and essential to human nature. Consequently, it first seems that there is no room in his philosophy for moral progress, at least in principle. Thus his definition of virtue (a quality useful or agreeable to its possessor or to others) appears to be independent of any form of progress or change.

> Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason . . . so that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (T 468–469)

The reference to "the constitution of [our] nature" implies that there is some sort of uniformity within the principles of human nature. This uniformity expresses itself in moral judgment as well as in other judgments.[4] Our morality would be different if we were constituted differently. When people condemn something, it is in fact a something which, from their nature, causes a certain sentiment in them. Therefore, virtue and vice, like secondary qualities, are perceptions in the mind. The importance of the reference to the constitution of human nature is that it affords a basis for explaining the uniformity Hume supposes there to be in people's moral sentiments.

> In what sense we can talk of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be considered afterwards. In the meantime, it

> may be observed, that there is such an uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance. (T 547)

It is because the moral norm is founded on nature as a matter of fact, a given human nature, that Hume can hold that "the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same."[5]

> It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes. . . . Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature. (EHU 83)

Therefore, it seems from these citations that Hume effectively supports the uniformity of human nature and particularly of moral principles. But if that is the case, how are we to understand the essay *Of Civil Liberty*, and particularly the following claim?

> I am apt, however, to entertain a suspicion, that the world is still too young to fix general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity. We have not yet had experience of three thousand years; so that not only the art of reasoning is still imperfect in this science, as in all others, but we even want sufficient materials upon which we can reason. It is not fully known, what degree of refinement, either in virtue or vice, human nature is susceptible of; nor what we may be expected of mankind from any great revolution in their education, customs, or principles. [6]

Hume suggests here that with time and experience, there can be progress not only in politics but also in the morals of the people. Does it mean that Hume's theory is inconsistent, or can we reconcile these two opposing passages? The outcome of this question is fundamental for the issue of moral progress. Thus, if Hume effectively supports the uniformity and the immutability of human nature, the notion of moral progress is inconsistent with his philosophy. However, my intention is to show that his conception of human nature should not be understood substantially, and that it is compatible with the notion of moral progress. Therefore, I shall first discuss the way one should understand this uniformity of human nature.

2. Human Nature Is Not Immutable

Firstly, the preceding passages concerning the uniformity of human nature do not show that Hume believed in a constancy of human nature which entails that history simply repeats itself. Constancy of human nature, for Hume, is a methodological principle that makes history possible; that is, possible for there to be any consistency and credibility in what the historian says.

> What would become of *history*, had we not a dependence on the veracity of the historian according to the experience which we have had of mankind? How could *politics* be a science, if laws and forms of government had not a uniform influence upon society? Where would be the foundation of *morals*, if particular characters had no certain or determinate power to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions? . . . It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage either in science or action of any kind without acknowledging . . . this *inference* from motive to voluntary actions, from characters to conduct. (EHU 90)

But it does not mean human nature (and more precisely what I will call the "social nature" of human beings) is not subject to change.

> This [the manners of men different in different ages and countries] affords room for many general observations concerning the gradual change of our sentiments and inclinations, and the different maxims which prevail in the different ages of human creatures. (EHU 86)

Therefore, the distinction between methodological and substantial uniformity needs to be drawn. Moreover, Hume's idea of historical explanation incorporates the inconstant and the exceptional in human behaviour. According to Humean thought, the significant contribution of history is that it discloses the consequences of irregular changes that affect human history as well as stressing the similarities.

Secondly, the notion of human nature is in itself fundamentally problematic. Talking about uniformity within human nature does not necessarily mean it is simply and strictly substantial.[7] We previously considered human nature as a fact in order to determine the universal moral principle which governs it. But we shall now question its origin. I will try to demonstrate that, according to Hume, the notion of normality in conjunction with the belief in a common nature is the origin of the uniformity between the members of the same community. The principle of sympathy is the means by which this uniformity is generated. Since I suggest that moral principles are universal, and that, at the same time, human nature considered in a wide sense (what I will call the

"social nature of mankind") is not immutable but capable of change and improvement, the notion of moral progress is consistent.

According to Hume, there is an "authority of human nature," which can be understood in two ways. As we have already shown in the first section, the first way is as a given fact, which comprises both the physical and psychological principles that are part of being human. The second way is more complex and involves the notion of normality and the principle of sympathy. Thus the psychological fact of belonging to a community is the ground for a belief in common features shared by its members. As most people have two legs and two arms, they infer, from the common features they notice, an idea of normality. The fear of not being normal makes them behave like the other members of the group. In my view, Hume means that this process of identification is at the origin of a uniform moral behavior among the members of the same community.

> To this principle [sympathy] we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and 'tis much more probable, that this resemblance arises from sympathy, than from any influence of the soil or climate, which, tho' they continue invariably the same, are not able to preserve the character of a nation the same for a century together. (T 316–317)

It is not only because human beings resemble each other or partake of the same nature that they sympathize with each other. It is also this resemblance and this common nature that can be explained by the principle of sympathy. Since human beings, consciously or not, want to be alike and act to become alike, according to the idea of human nature they have, they think they are alike and believe in a common nature. If sympathy is a very powerful principle of human nature, it is because it contributes to making this nature, but also because it creates the belief in its existence.

> [H]ere is displayed the force of many sympathies. Our moral sentiment is itself a feeling chiefly of that nature, and our regard to a character with others seems to arise only from a care of preserving a character with ourselves ; and in order to attain this end, we find it necessary to prop our tottering judgement on the correspondent approbation of mankind. (EPM 276)

Therefore, contrary to one tradition among Hume scholars, my suggestion is that Hume holds that human nature should be understood as an assimilating process and not as a permanent, unchangeable datum.[8] The will to identify one's sentiments with what we think others expect from us generates a

motivating impulse (i.e., a feeling) and fundamentally expresses the fear of an abnormal nature. This fear of not feeling like others and of being excluded from a seemingly common feeling leads us to fulfill an obligation grounded on the belief in a common human nature.

> When any virtuous motive or principle is common to human nature, a person, who feels his heart devoid of that principle, may hate himself upon that account, and may perform the action without the motive, from a certain sense of duty, in order to acquire by practice, that virtuous principle, or at least, to disguise to himself, as much as possible, his want of it. (T 479)

Moral obligation in this sense originates in a presumably abnormal state. And sympathy is stronger than we first thought as the source of morality.[9] Firstly, because through the principle of sympathy, the appearance of morals has a stronger effect on moral agents than basic moral obligation. Secondly, moral duty makes sense only if it refers to a natural inclination: the moral sense paradoxically constitutes itself with nonmoral forces.[10]

> But tho', on some occasions, a person may perform an action merely out of regard to its moral obligation, yet still this supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action. (T 479)

My statement of this position should not be understood as a refutation of the existence of a common human nature. The capacity of transcending one's nature is indeed part of human nature. The artifice does not create a new principle; it permits natural sympathy and passions to be realized, spread out, and liberated from their primitive limits. As Gilles Deleuze says in *Empirisme et subjectivité* : "la vraie dualité chez Hume n'est pas entre l'affection et la raison, la nature et l'artifice, mais entre l'ensemble de la nature où l'artifice est compris, et l'esprit que cet ensemble affecte et détermine."[11] That is to say human creativity, the possibility of resorting to artifice, is one of the principles of human nature. Therefore, even if morality were to be artificial in the sense previously defined, it would not mean that morality is not a principle of human nature.

In this sense, there is room for improvement, and especially moral progress, within the framework of a given human nature. I have tried to highlight the process of evolution in moral behavior and to show that it was allowed by the principle of sympathy. However, any interpretation of Hume will need to explain both the uniformity and the diversity he recognizes in human beings. Doing so will call for the distinction between human nature (composed of essential principles like the principle of sympathy or the principles of morals) and social nature. If we combine the two claims we have

already distinguished (the uniformity of moral principles and the malleability of the social nature made possible by the effects of sympathy), we can reach the conclusion that what I will call "the gradual progress of improvement," which comprises moral progress, is essential to human history. I intend to show that Hume's philosophy supports a theory of moral progress via the progress of civilization.

3. The Role of Circumstances: The Social and Historical Context

The interpretation of the role of sympathy within morals suggests that human communities are in fact "moral and spiritual unit[ies], based upon the mutual influence of individuals, and possessing an individuality of [their] own."[12] Men are morally, as well as materially, interdependent.

As I have argued in the previous section, they seek the approval of others and will for the most part fashion themselves and behave in such a way as to win it: "So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or less degree" (T 592). They will judge and act in accordance with the prevailing norms of their society. Therefore, I intend to argue that, according to Hume, in so far as the social circumstances differ, different moral values (through different views of utility) prevail in different societies. What is generally approved or disapproved will be different: "Particular customs and manners alter the usefulness of qualities: they also alter their merit" (EPM 241).

> Man is a very variable being, and susceptible of many different opinions, principles and rules of conduct. What may be true, while he adheres to one way of thinking, will be found false, when he has embraced an opposite set of manners and opinions.[13]

Therefore, Hume regards the pattern of behavior of a society as a socially conditioned modification of the principles of human nature, which in themselves are abstractions from the concrete variety of human social experience.

> There is a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate. There are also characters peculiar to different nations and particular persons, as well as common to mankind. (T 402–403)

It must follow that the moral worth of persons' motives and actions will be different in different ages and society. Persons' ways of thinking and feeling

are to a great extent molded by those of the group to which they belong; so that human nature, far from being rigid and invariable, is in fact socially plastic and variable: "It is not fully known . . . what may be expected of mankind from any great revolution in their education, customs, or principles."[14] Therefore, the key to the relationship between uniformity and diversity is to place the uniformity passages in their proper context (OCL 87).

> We must not, however, expect that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions. (EHU 85)

The sentiment common to all mankind is better thought of as a broad, schematic principle that structures moral thought than a substantive feeling. And such a sentiment does not have much content. Any quality could in principle have one of these features. Thus the principle of morals is like the principle of gravity; and the particular circumstances in which each society finds itself are the "inclinations of the ground":

> The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the same mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the same principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses. (D 333)

Therefore, the judgments based on the sentiment common to all mankind can vary with culture. In fact, Hume argues that custom determines which of the sources of moral sentiment will predominate in a particular culture:

> Different customs have also some influence as well as different utilities; and by giving an early biass to the mind, may produce a superior propensity, either to the useful or the agreeable qualities; to those which regard self, or those which extend to society. (D 336–337)

Consequently, when we begin to look for the causes that will explain differences in moral judgments and behaviors, we must take into account what Hume calls the "moral causes" of behaviour (cultural, psychological, technological, and sociological factors), that is, the differences that can only be explained by culture and context:

> By *moral* causes, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us. Of this kind are, the nature of the

> government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which people live, the situation of the nation with regards to its neighbours, and such like circumstances.[15]

Custom and education "mould the human mind from its infancy and form it into a fixed and established character" (EHU 86). Cultural factors account for the balance between the different kinds of moral consideration. Different customs generate different kinds of behavior, and so different qualities will be considered useful. Culture deeply influences which qualities are found to be both useful and agreeable, and so culture, rather than nature, determines the qualities that a people will find of merit. Hume can legitimately conclude from this point that there will be some important differences in morality in distinct cultures, without being inconsistent.[16]

> The different stations of life influence the whole fabric, external and internal; and these different stations arise necessarily, because uniformly, from the necessary and uniform principles of human nature. [Society] produces . . . all those others actions and objects, which cause such a diversity, and at the same time maintain such an uniformity in human life.[17]

Does it mean that according to Hume, all the different moral systems have the same moral worth? Effectively, in explaining that behind different moral systems, the same principle is at work, does not Hume support a relativist theory of morals? If that were the case, any claim about moral progress would not make sense within his philosophy: relativity is inconsistent with the notion of progress. But my suggestion is that it is not the case. To support my claim, I intend to argue that the notion of utility is at the heart of Hume's conception of progress, and that this point justifies a nonrelativist interpretation of his moral theory. That is to say, according to Hume, progress is essentially the improvement of usefulness and of the conception of what is useful in general.

4. Moral Taste Can Be Educated and Improved by Experience

Claiming that it is possible to take different moral points of view of the same situation (which lead to opposite moral judgments) does not mean that they all have the same moral status. To confirm this interpretation, we can refer to the notion of a judicious spectator emphasized by Hume in the *Treatise*. The reason for the need to analyze this particular type of moral spectator is that it can be understood as the paradigm of a qualified moral critique.

> It seldom happens, that we do not think an enemy vicious, and can distinguish between his opposition to our interest, and real villainy or baseness. But this hinders not, but that the sentiments are, in themselves, distinct; and a *man of temper and judgment* may preserve himself from these illusions. (T 472; emphasis added)

The difficulty intrinsic to morals is that it has the same sort of objects as self-interest. The sentiments coming from these two sources are not so different in flavor that they cannot be confounded: "'Tis true, those sentiments, from interest and morals, are apt to be confounded, and naturally run into one another." But a "man of temper and judgment" (T 472) is more likely to recognize and differentiate moral sentiments from self-interested sentiments, and virtue from vice, than any other man. He has more experience and can reason better than others about morals. Therefore, even though moral judgment is the object of a sentiment, the fact that there is a need to reach the general point of view to make right or correct moral judgments renders the qualities of the spectator fundamental for the propriety of its conclusions.

> You see then, continued I, that the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions they draw are often very different. That they reason aright with regard to this subject, more than with regard to any other, it is not incumbent to any moralist to show. It is sufficient, that the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and larger experience. (D 336)

This point raises the fundamental question of the development of human faculties which I would like to call the "perfectibility" of the human mind. In a footnote in which Hume attempts to explain "how it happens, that men so much surpass animals in reasoning, and one man so surpasses another," we learn that, however much the operations of the understanding are common to all men, human faculties are subject to progress. More importantly, he adds that the "great difference in human understandings" is affected by "books and conversation" which "enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another" (EHU 107).

Therefore, Hume can draw general conclusions about the origin and the progress of human faculties relative to particular circumstances and talk about the "natural progress of human thought," when "the mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior."[18] Reason will not be uniform in all people, but will be extremely sensitive to historical circumstances, since the range of concepts people can employ depends on their experience. Accordingly, one's moral feelings are susceptible to improvement, and also to degradation. One's value judgments can be altered by the introduction of new causes: there are psycho-

logical changes which can alter one's moral taste. For instance, a change in beliefs, in one's judgment of reality, may produce a change of one's value judgment. Or a person may cause a change in his or her own moral characteristics.

> All the differences in morals may be reduced to this one general foundation, and may be accounted for by the different views, which people take of these circumstances. (D 336)

But while the room for change in moral taste in the sphere of personal relations is quite small, in the sphere of civil relations, the room for change is great. As a person becomes civilized, his or her taste (or judgment) as to what is a good or bad act in civil relations will improve. This improvement is relative to one's conception of the useful. Views of utility differ, and, with the progress of society, they become more enlightened. What was once regarded as socially beneficial is with more experience seen to be not so.

> You can reply nothing, but by showing the great inconveniences of assassination; which could any one have proved clearly to the ancients, he had reformed their sentiments in this particular. (D 335)

In this sense, it is fundamental to notice that the origin of the civil institution of justice and government is not linked directly to historical circumstances and the principles of human nature, but makes a detour through the historical acquisition of certain concepts. Consequently, the historical context and the level of civilization reached by a society will condition the quality of people's morality. What is acceptable and necessary in rude ages ceases to be so with the progress of civilization and political knowledge, "nor will the same maxims of government suit . . . a rude people, that may be proper in a more advanced stage of society" (H X 52). Hume advances the thesis about the historical progress of the human mind to demonstrate that savages cannot attain the truth in advance of civilized man.

Thus certain virtues need the reaching of a minimal degree of civilization to be realized. For instance, the list of virtues that appears in the *Enquiry* (EPM 277) includes many qualities that men have little or no opportunity to develop or display in a savage state, or in conditions that do not include peace, order, security, and a degree of individual autonomy, that is to say, the conditions recommended by Hume's account of the gradual progress of civilization in the *History*.

In other words, he seems to regard this list of qualities as part of the system of morals that emerges when human beings develop appropriate social institutions (that is to say, consonant with the nature of things, which I will call the "naturalness of political institutions"). This argument leads us to two conclusions: one concerning the relationship between human nature and civ-

ilization, the other about the relationship between civilization and the morality of the people.

5. The Naturalness of Progress: The Progress of Civilization Relative to Human Nature

There is a fundamental naturalist component in Hume's political theory that leads us directly to his claim of the superiority of modern liberal commercial society. Hume believes that if one takes people as they are, given law and liberty, the natural course of improvement towards civilization will lead to a commercial society in the absence of distorting factors (like slavery or superstition).

> [A]ccording to *the most natural course of things*, industry and arts and trade increase the power of the sovereign as well as the happiness of the subjects. . . . This will easily appear from a few considerations, which will present to us the consequences of sloth and barbarity. (OC 260)

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the *History of England* can be read as a demonstration of the superiority of civilised society over earlier stages of society. In tracing the mechanism of progress by which the civilized condition was reached, the *History* shows what life was like in earlier ages, materially and morally, and why inferior social arrangements are inferior. Hume's account of the gradual progress of improvement contains the ground of his claim for the superiority of modern to ancient civilization.

> Above all, a civilised nation, like the English, who have happily established the most perfect and the most accurate system of liberty, that ever was found compatible with government, ought to be cautious about appealing to the practice of their ancestors, or regarding the maxims of uncultivated ages as certain rules for their present conducts. An acquaintance with the history of the remote periods of their government is chiefly *useful* by instructing them to cherish their present constitution, from a comparison or contrast with the condition of those distant times. (H I 446)

One of the reasons for its superiority is that it does not distort the tendencies of human nature, and therefore follows the political principle that even sovereigns "must take mankind as they find them," the best policy being "to comply with the common bent of mankind and give it all the improvements of which it is susceptible":

> The less *natural* any set of principles are, which support a particular society, the more difficulty will a legislator meet with in raising and cultivating them. (OC 260)

A moral system, as much as a political one, must take human nature as it is. The decline of Rome seems to strengthen his claim that the ancient republics had to distort human nature in order to achieve that public spirit which distinguished them, gloriously but briefly. The "ancient policy was violent, and contrary to the more natural and usual course of things":

> Were the testimony of history less positive and circumstantial, such a government [Sparta] would appear a mere philosophical whim or fiction, and impossible ever to be reduced to practice. (OC 260)

> [Sparta will seem a prodigy to anyone] who has considered human nature, as it displayed itself in other nations, and other ages. (EPM 259)

We can conclude from these claims that the difference between different moral systems, and different models of civilization in general, is that, relative to the constitution of human nature, some fit it more that others and permit a better realization of its capacities, that is to say without perverting its tendencies. We have to add to this point that there is also a fundamental materialist component in the Humean philosophy of progress. The progress of civilization cannot be examined without referring to the improvement of the quality of life:

> It must be acknowledged in spite of those who declaim so violently against refinement in the arts, or what they are pleased to call luxury, that as much better as an industrious tradesman is both a better man and a better citizen than one of those idle retainers who formerly depended on the great families, so much is the life of a modern nobleman more laudable than that of an ancient baron. (H III 71–72)

According to Hume, the good life is dependent on economic progress, because the good life is the busy, occupied life, and happiness depends on industry and "that quick march of the spirits which takes a man from himself." He argues here that "the ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous," and presents a contrast: on the one hand, savagery, isolation, idleness, ignorance, vice; on the other, industry, sociableness, humanity, knowledge, good morals.[19]

> Thus bridges are built; harbours opened; ramparts raised; canals formed; fleets equipped; and armies disciplined; everywhere, by the

> care of government, which, though composed of men subject to all human infirmities, becomes by one of the finest and most subtle inventions imaginable, a composition, which is, in some measure, exempted of all these infirmities. (T 539)

The progress of civilization is improvement on all fronts: the mechanical and the liberal arts advance together with manners. Industry, knowledge, good manners and humanity are indissolubly linked together and, from experience as well as reason, are found to be peculiar to the more polished ages. Therefore, Hume's conception of progress has two fundamental components: its naturalness and its usefulness for the quality of life.

6. Moral Progress and Politics: The Primacy of Civilization on Morality and Manners

As we have already stated, society and civilization can be understood as the conditions of possibility for the creation and development of certain moral values or virtues. In that sense, civilization and its progress are the conditions of moral progress. This confirms the fact that Hume was reluctant to support a theory of moral relativism. His philosophy explains the diversity of moral systems, but without legitimating these differences by any kind of moral argument. The diversity of morals is a fact of which he has to take account. Nevertheless, all moral systems are not equivalent. There are, according to Hume, certain conditions that permit or favor the arousal of the best moral and social norms relative to human nature; and these conditions are essentially relative to the degree of civilization society has reached.

We have already shown the fundamental impact of economics, industry, arts, and sciences on the progress of morals and manners. But besides, one should note the influence of politics, and particularly of legislators and political institutions. Effectively, the progress of civilization is also the result of the work of legislators and creative minorities through their progressive enlightenment and growing experience. The historical role of people, as such, is uncreative and passive. Their manners, morals, and national character are partially constituted by the governing part of the state and the political institutions.[21] The legislators have an influence in the fashioning of a people's character and manners, both directly through their personal example in the infancy of society, and indirectly through the laws and institutions they establish.[22] Sympathy is the channel by which this influence spreads through society.

Therefore, if Hume recognizes the importance of politics, economics, sciences, and arts, that is to say civilization, in determining human behavior and manners, nothing is said about manners being an important causal factor: the question of manners is irrelevant as such. Thus if political institutions have a

great effect in determining manners, manners do not have the same influence on the proper functioning of a constitution. Correctly modeled constitutions function independently of the manners of the people, making it in the interests even of bad men to act for the public good:

> 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. All they can do is to change their situation, and render the observance of justice the immediate interest of some particular persons, and its violation their more remote. (T 537)

The political scientist is not concerned with manners and morals, but with the balancing of separate interests and the skillful division of power in order to best secure the public interest. There is a distinction between public virtue and private virtue; the former does not depend on the latter, but on a well-conceived and well-constructed political machinery:

> The ages of greatest public spirit are not always most eminent for private virtue. Good laws may beget order and moderation in the government, where the manners and customs have instilled little humanity or justice into the tempers of men.[22]

For instance, the most illustrious period of Roman history, considered from a political view, when the balance of the constitution was working most effectively, was an age of rampant immorality. Therefore, Hume's political scientist is not mainly concerned with the morality of people because the fate of nations depends on their institutions, not on their manners and morals.

7. Conclusion

I set out to show that the notion of moral progress makes sense in Hume's philosophy. Even though Hume suggests that this question is not central, I conclude that, in concentrating on the question of the progress of civilization, Hume was expressing a view on moral progress.

I first argued that the notion of moral progress itself was consistent within Hume's philosophical principles. The key to the problem was to distinguish between the natural principles that direct human nature and the social nature of human beings, the first one being immutable, and the second being malleable. Drawing this distinction permits us to reconcile the highly problematic notions of uniformity and diversity within human nature. This is necessary to show that Hume's philosophy permits a theory of moral progress. Then, in

connection with the distinction between moral principles and moral behavior, I suggested that both are subject to improvement.

Having argued that the notion of moral progress makes sense, I then tried to understand the role it plays in the Humean conception of the progress of civilization. This led us to conclude that its conditions and its different states of development are for Hume intrinsically related to the progress of civilization in general. Furthermore, moral progress is secondary and relative to the general improvement of society. The morals of the people have no active role in its progress; politics, economics, sciences, and the arts are the main causes of the gradual progress of improvement.

Therefore, against Montesquieu, Hume considers the progress of manners and customs (i.e., moral behavior or the moral worth of behavior) as a consequence of the progress of civilization, and not as its cause.[23] Hume's principal aim is to underline the process of civilization and to show the means by which it spreads though all the spheres of society.

NOTES

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1. Especially in France during what is called the French Enlightenment (Diderot and *The Encyclopedia*, Rousseau and his first and second *Discourse*, Voltaire, etc.).

2. David Hume, A *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 546 (hereafter cited as "T").

3. David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 84–85 (hereafter cited as "EHU" and "EPM").

4. Cf. the association of ideas or the principle of causation.

5. David Hume, "A Dialogue," 336 (hereafter cited as "D")

6. David Hume, "Of Civil Liberty," in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), 87 (hereafter cited as "OCL").

7. If the uniformity within human nature were substantial, it would mean that it is not subject to change.

8. The references that follow are taken from S. K. Wertz, "Hume, History, and Human Nature," in D. W. Livingston and M. Martin, eds., *Hume as a Philosopher of Science, Politics, and History* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 1991), 481–483. David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacy: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970): Hume's type of history "constitutes a fallacy," the fallacy of the universal

man, which is allegedly committed when an historian makes inferences on the assumption that a people or individuals are intellectually and psychologically the same in all times, places, and circumstances. Human nature is assumed to remain constant, and from this nonhistorical premise, we are supposed to infer historical particulars. J. B. Black, *The Art of History: A Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1965): "Hume sees only similarities"; "Hume did not grasp the elements of the problem [of historical explanation], because he was dominated, as indeed were all the eighteenth century philosophers, by the belief that human nature was uniformly the same at all times and places." Alfred Stern, *Philosophy of History and the Problem of Values* (The Hague, 1962): "Hume maintained the thesis of an invariable human nature." R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946): Hume, like other men of the enlightenment, was barred "from scientific history by a substantialistic view of human nature which was really inconsistent with his philosophical principles"; "Human nature was conceived substantialistically as something static and permanent, an unvarying substratum underlying the course of historical changes and all human activities. History never repeated itself but human nature remained eternally unaltered."

9. "Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions" (T 618).

10. For instance, paternal feeling is a duty if it does not arise spontaneously. But this duty is primarily grounded on natural human constitution: it is natural to have such feelings. The father who is devoid of it is in that sense abnormal. And if he conforms to the duty by obligation, it means he wants to join the norm: "Tho' there was no obligation to relieve the miserable, our humanity would lead us to it; and when we omit that duty, the immorality of this omission arises from its being a proof, that we want the natural sentiments of humanity. A father knows it to be his duty to take care of his children: But he has also a natural inclination to it. And if no human creature had that inclination, no one cou'd lie under any such obligation" (T 518).

11. Gilles Deleuze, *Empirisme et subjectivité* (Paris: PUF, 1953), 32.

12. G. R. Morrow, "The Significance of the Doctrine of Sympathy in Hume and Adam Smith," *Philosophical Review* 32 (1923), 68.

13. David Hume, "Of Commerce," in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), 255–256 (hereafter cited as "OC").

14. Hume also has a further polemical point in stressing the uniformities in the passage. He wants his reader to realize that the Greeks and Romans, to whom he refers here, were only humans. So part of Hume's point is to debunk the idea that the ancients had superior moral and physical stature compared to the moderns (for instance, against Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cf. Denise Leduc-Fayette, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le mythe de l'antiquité* [Paris: Vrin, 1974]). Hume defends modern society by asking us to look closely at the behavior of Romans and Greeks. Indeed, in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," he argues that when we consider modern and ancient society as a whole, the ancients do not look so attractive after all.

15. David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), 198 (hereafter cited as "ONC").

16. "Of National Characters" is devoted to this thesis. The material differences between the people on two sides of a national boundary may not differ

significantly, but their manners and their values may diverge considerably (ONC 204–207).

17. David Hume, *History of England by Hume and Smollett with a Continuation by the Rev. T. S. Hughes,* vols. I–XX (London: Valpy, 1834–36), 402 (hereafter cited as "H").

18. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion and Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 24.

19. David Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary,* ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), 271 (hereafter cited as "ORA").

20. However, even though the role of politics and institutions should be remarked, its influence upon the morals of the people should not be overemphasized. Human nature, through moral sentiments and moral principles, is the necessary material of legislators. Therefore, politicians must comply with the common bent of mankind (as was shown in section 5) while trying to improve it. "Any artifice of politicians may assist nature in the producing of those sentiments, which she suggests to us, and may even, on some occasions, produce alone an approbation or esteem for any particular action; but it is impossible it should be the sole cause of the distinction we make betwixt vice and virtue. . . . The utmost politicians can perform, is to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the material, and give us some notion of moral distinctions" (T 500).

21. The pattern of civil relations prevailing at any time is dependent on human insight into the implicit laws of civil relations and on customary respect for these laws. Governments can cause their subjects to behave in specific ways by setting up rewards and punishments. By the influence of this motivation, they have become accustomed to acting in these ways, and may come to think of them as good.

22. David Hume, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary,* ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), 25.

23. Cf. Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des lois* (Paris: GF, 1979).