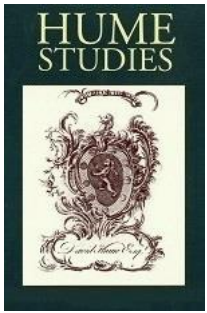

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Abstract: Treatise 2.3.6, "Of the influence of the imagination on the passions," provides a magnified view into the relationship between motivation, morality, and politics in Hume's philosophy. Here, Hume analyzes a "noted passage" from the history of antiquity in which the citizens of fifth-century Athens deliberated over whether to burn the ships of their neighboring Grecians after winning a decisive naval victory against the Persians. Hume finds the passage notable precisely because of a failure of the imagination to exert an influence on the Athenians' passions during their deliberations, leading them to abstain from further military action. This paper discusses how Hume's analysis of this event reveals new connections between his passional, moral, and political theories in the *Treatise*.

Introduction

Book 2, part 3, section 6 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, titled "Of the influence of the imagination on the passions,"[1] provides a magnified view into the complex relationship between motivation, morality, and politics in Hume's philosophy. In this section, Hume analyzes a "noted passage" from the history of ancient Greece in which the citizens of democratic Athens deliberated over whether to burn the ships of their neighboring Grecians after having just won a decisive naval victory against the Persians. Hume finds the passage notable due to the curious indeterminacy of

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the Athenians' collective decision. After deliberating for some time, they opted not to burn their neighbors' ships, yet no extant historical account provides the definitive rationale behind the Athenians' abstention from further military action. For his purposes in the *Treatise*, Hume appropriates this episode to illustrate the influence that the imagination has on the passions, although, as I will contend in this paper, what he says about it only adds to the curiosity surrounding it. Hume concludes that what happened during the deliberations was precisely a *failure* of the imagination to exercise a sufficient influence on the passions, posing and then answering a series of questions concerning the interplay of the imagination and the passions during group deliberations; the relation of self-interest and justice in evaluating the morality of group actions; and the optimal distribution of political authority in situations where the direction of group action is warranted.

My paper offers a close study of this under-examined section of the *Treatise*, arguing that Hume's reading of this noted passage in ancient history discovers indeterminacy at the passional and moral levels of the Athenians' deliberations, thereby forcing him to lean on his as yet unelaborated political theory in order to give an adequate judgment of what took place. Structurally, my argument will follow the movement of Hume's thought from motivation to morality to politics in his appraisal of the deliberations, tracking a pattern of what I shall call his "forms of moderation": a "natural" moderation, between the imagination and the motivating passions, wherein the calm passions mitigate the more violent; a "moral" moderation, between natural self-partiality and the artificial virtue of justice, wherein an acquired "common point of view" corrects the natural tendency toward unmitigated self-regard; and a "political" moderation, between the common people and the political elect, that seeks the optimal distribution of authority for guiding group conduct. It is in the apparent absence of the first two forms of moderation during the Athenians' deliberations, I will argue, that Hume turns to the third to explain how they came to their final decision not to burn the ships. This judgment is significant because it shows that Hume turns to his political theory, not fully elaborated until Book 3 of the *Treatise*, to think through an apparently passional quandary in Book 2. This interpenetration of the motivational, moral, and political dimensions of Hume's thought raises new issues about his political philosophy that would not necessarily emerge from a direct engagement with his overtly political essays. Among these issues, which I treat in the latter half of the paper, are Hume's views on the intra-communal weighting of justice (as opposed to a justice that is weighted inter-communally or internationally), the efficacy of democratic deliberation as a means of making prudent collective decisions (given the susceptibility of human beings to their violent passions), and the preeminent role that elite leaders play in collective decision making. My primary aim is to use the Athenian case to make Hume's own views on these issues more explicit.

However, at the end of the paper, I do question whether Hume's skepticism about the adequacy of democracy for making prudent decisions is entirely warranted.

Treatise 2.3.6: 'A Noted Passage'

In Book 2, part 3, section 6 of *A Treatise on Human Nature*, titled "Of the influence of the imagination on the passions" (SBN 424), Hume cites a "noted passage in the history of Greece" as evidence for his claim that a general, abstract idea does not influence the imagination with the same intensity as a particular, vivacious idea. The passage concerns the Athenian leader Themistocles, who, after orchestrating a crushing victory over the armies of the Persian king Xerxes, sought to assert Athens' preeminence in the Greek peninsula by a deceptive design:

> *Themistocles* told the *Athenians*, that he had form'd a design, which wou'd be highly useful to the public, but which 'twas impossible for him to communicate to them without ruining the execution, since its success depended entirely on the secrecy with which it shou'd be conducted. The *Athenians*, instead of granting him full power to act as he thought fitting, order'd him to communicate his design to *Aristides*, in whose prudence they had an entire confidence, and whose opinion they were resolv'd blindly to submit to. The design of *Themistocles* was secretly to set fire to the fleet of all the *Grecian* commonwealths, which was assembled in a neighbouring port, and which being once destroy'd, wou'd give the *Athenians* the empire of the sea without any rival. (T 2.3.6.3; SBN 425)

After consulting with their trusted advisor Aristides, the Athenians unanimously rejected Themistocles' plan to burn the Grecian ships in port. As the story goes, Aristides began his discourse with the Athenians by agreeing that nothing could be more advantageous than Themistocles' design, although he qualified that nothing he could think of could be more unjust. Indeed, the Athenians would not have taken such a statement from Aristides (whom they had affectionately nicknamed Aristides "the Just") lightly. But the extant histories of fifth-century Greece do not go into much detail about the discourse, and so it is impossible to know, except by speculation, what factor(s) ultimately convinced the Athenians to reject Themistocles' plan.

What can be determined from this noted passage is that the Athenians took a moment to deliberate over the matter. Hume, who appears to be citing Plutarch's version[2] of events here, notes that the Athenians at first responded to Themistocles' proposal by saying that they would go "blindly" with the counsel of Aristides the Just. But neither Hume nor Plutarch reports what sort of counsel Aristides gave them. In both accounts, Aristides comments on the advantageous, though

"iniquitous," character of Themistocles' design, then defers to the Athenians, apparently leaving it up to them to judge democratically whether their self-interest should outweigh their concern for justice, or vice versa.

Given that the Athenians unanimously decided not to burn the ships, it would not be far-fetched to infer that their decision reflected a shared concern for justice.[3] According to Hume, this is how most historians[4] have interpreted this episode from classical history. Yet in so doing, he says, these historians have overlooked a more salient truth about human nature manifest in the proceedings. Hume attempts to correct their oversight with his own original commentary. "I see nothing so extraordinary in this proceeding of the *Athenians* [as what the historians see]," he writes,

> [for] the same reasons which render it so easy for philosophers to establish these sublime maxims, tend, in part, to diminish the merit of such conduct in that people. Philosophers never ballance betwixt profit and honesty, because their decisions are general, and neither their passions nor imaginations are interested in the objects. And tho' in the present case the advantage was immediate to the *Athenians*, yet as it was known only under the general notion of advantage, without being conceiv'd by any particular idea, it must have had a less considerable influence on their imaginations, and have been a less violent temptation, than if they had been acquainted with all its circumstances. (T 2.3.6.4; SBN 425–26)

On Hume's contrarian view, the Athenians seem far less moralistic here than apathetic. He thinks that if Aristides had eloquently disclosed the full details of Themistocles' secret plot (if he specified, for example, the material, tactical, and even psychological benefits to be gained by asserting naval supremacy in the region), rather than merely referring to the "general notion"[5] of its advantage (its utility considered without reference to any immediate particular), then the situation might have turned out differently. The public's imagination would have gotten involved, and with its imagination its more violent passions, and if that had been the case, then it would be "difficult to conceive," says Hume, "that a whole people, unjust and violent as men commonly are, shou'd so unanimously have adher'd to justice, and rejected any considerable advantage" (ibid).

Unaccounted for is why Hume rules out the possibility that the Athenians might have had justice on their minds. Scholars, too, have generally taken Hume at his word that moral concerns ought not be considered as part of the deliberations. In the passional theory of Book 2, where we find this commentary, lively passions always attend a lively imagination, and it is in the nature of human beings to follow their violent ahead of their calmer passions when the former are more formidably agitated. People do this not out of a conscious concern for any

particular interest necessarily, but out of a strong tendency of their nature. The violent passions respond to the immediate intensity of imagined gains and pains, whereas the calmer passions, to which Hume indexes the activity of deliberation, proceed by what appear to be more "rational" considerations, like weighing the advantage of acting now versus later (or, in the Athenians' case, not acting at all), and for this reason are often conflated with the faculty of reason (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417). Yet reason, though it may inform action, will never be its sufficient motivator,[6] and so it would seem that Hume's commentary implies that neither the violent nor the calmer passions of the Athenians were *significantly* actuated during their proceedings with Aristides. To be sure, they paused for a moment over Themistocles' proposal in order to consider its pros and cons, but the general notion of its advantage, communicated through Aristides and mediated by his judgment, did not carry enough vivacity to move their imaginations either toward advantage or justice. To be so moved, they would have required a more impressive disclosure of the opportunity presented them. According to Hume, they did not receive such a disclosure, and so had no immediate sense of passional urgency or moral duty. This was lucky for the keepers of the ships, for if the Athenians had received adequate information from their leaders (better yet, if they had received it in an "eloquent" manner), then it is "difficult to conceive" that they would have chosen otherwise than to destroy the vulnerable Grecian fleet and assert their naval supremacy in the peninsula. So their apparent inaction does not even reflect indecision for Hume, but indifference to the option presented them. On his view, the Athenians simply did not feel inspired enough to pursue that immediate advantage which alone could have budged them from their apathetic inertia.[7]

In the following sections, I will explain where the three "forms of moderation" that I mentioned in the introduction—the natural, the moral, and the political—figure into Hume's discussion of this section of the *Treatise*, and how they can aid our understanding of his judgment of this historical event.

Natural Moderation

Thus far I have argued that the imaginations of the Athenians were *not* excited by Themistocles' proposal, and because they were not excited, the violent and calmer passions were not *significantly* compelled either to advantageous or just action from the proceedings. The task of the present section is to work out what I will call the "natural" form of moderation with which Hume begins his multi-leveled analysis of the Athenian case. By the end of the section, I will have shown that, for Hume, although the Athenians ultimately refrain from doing violence to their fellow Grecians, the natural form of moderation is nevertheless absent from their deliberations. I will also have questioned whether Hume's "nonmoral" passional reading of the events is the only way of looking at the matter.

John Rawls briefly addresses Hume's account of "nonmoral" passional deliberation in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*.[8] He refers to Hume's discussion of passional deliberation as "nonmoral" because Hume does not expressly engage questions of natural and artificial virtue, as he will later in Book 3. Now, Rawls emphasizes the role that the calmer passions, which tend to be attuned to our more permanent interests, play in Hume's account of deliberation, noting their capacity to check the reflexive deployment of the violent passions in favor of more patient courses of action (*Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 33). He cites the example of Aristides the Just as one such case in which calm deliberation had the effect of "reducing or even eliminating the present influence of some [violent] passions." He thinks that Hume's account implies that our calmer passions can "weight," or prioritize, future ends that will sustain our pleasures for longer than certain immediate ends that will likely exhaust our pleasures much sooner. "In this way," says Rawls, "[the deliberation of the calm passions] may largely control which passions direct and influence our conduct" (40).

Although he does not use this language in his *Lectures*, Rawls likewise seems to be seeking out the "natural" form of moderation that Hume posits between the imagination and the passions. Rawls reads the calmer passions into Hume's commentary on the Athenians (though Hume himself does not mention them), suggesting that the Athenians were not so much passionless in their deliberations as unemotional. On a Rawlsian reading, instead of taking advantage of their vulnerable neighbors, the unprovoked Athenians employed their calmer passions, weighing the advantage of pursuing a violent versus a peaceful course. Rawls's analysis importantly proposes that keeping the status quo is not a dispassionate activity for Hume. Nor is it entirely unimaginative. There is always something at stake, some intimation of future pleasures or pains, even when one is simply maintaining a conservative program. So the imagination and the passions are never completely dormant, even in moments like *Treatise* 2.3.6 when their mutual communication seems lackadaisical at best. On a Rawlsian reading, then, the Athenians' seeming indifference was probably just the form taken by an underlying calm passion. Hence deliberation, on Rawls's reading,

> is something we must *learn* to do [in all situations]. It involves forming certain conceptions, going through various steps; it also involves the *imaginative rehearsal* of the consequences of adopting various alternatives, and so on. As we gain *practice*, we do it more easily, and the benefits of deliberating, as judged by our success in fulfilling our calm passions and more basic interests, are greater. (41)

"Calm reason," as Rawls elsewhere calls this imaginative mode of deliberation, is analogous to what I am calling the "natural" form of moderation. The closest

Humean analogy is probably "strength of mind," a habituated mental state in which one exercises the calm passions ahead of the more violent most of the time. "What we call strength of mind," writes Hume,

> implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent; tho' we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire. From these variations of temper proceeds the great difficulty of deciding concerning the actions and resolutions of men, where there is any contrariety of motives and passions. (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418)

Rawls's "calm reason" complements Hume's "strength of mind" quite well. Moreover, Rawls importantly observes the potential for the calmer passions to be strengthened through repetitive rehearsals. As we practice using them and experience their prudential effects, our interest in employing them compounds. With a bit of imaginative training, Rawls thinks, the calmer passions can curtail the violent ones, and over time, attain sufficient strength to overpower them in cases where they might incite us to reckless behavior. Still, we must remember Hume's cautionary word that there is no man so virtuous as to have constant possession of his strength of mind. Even the strongest deliberators are susceptible to violent turns of the passions, and cannot be expected to act with restraint in all cases. But what are the implications of these so-called "variations in temper"? Is Hume implying that some objects are so imposing to the imagination that even exceptionally calm people cannot help but submit to their force? Is deliberation so permeated by the violent passions as to render Hume's notion of "strength of mind" merely provisional?

These are troubling questions for those seeking in Hume's philosophy a stable standard of moderation in deliberative scenarios. What I am calling his natural form of moderation depends heavily on present contingencies—the vivacity of the object, the cumulative passional dispositions of the agent—and so one instantiation of it cannot be generalized to cover all like cases. In other words, natural moderation fluctuates from person to person and group to group, and it would be a step beyond Hume's skepticism to try to establish firmer grounds for its definition. Still, I wonder whether we shouldn't step beyond Rawls and Hume in questioning whether the Athenian case is an obviously "nonmoral" one. Both consider the proceedings of the Athenians only in terms of how the imagination and the passions responded to a potentially advantageous action. But what if the situation were to be reevaluated from a moral perspective? Did not Aristides the Just remind the Athenians that they were entrenched in a social context in which their actions might portend "iniquitous" consequences for the neighboring Grecians? Recall Aristides' assessment of Themistocles' plan: nothing could have been more

advantageous than burning up the ships; and yet nothing could have been more unjust. Indeed, Hume is skeptical that the Athenians would have considered the potentially immoral outcomes of such preemptive aggression—"unjust and violent as men commonly are." But then, does Hume's understanding of how the violent passions operate totally foreclose the possibility that the Athenians could have, under the same circumstances, taken the time to calmly consider, then morally reject, Themistocles' plan? Is natural moderation so precarious, and the violent passions so blinding, that there is little psychic space remaining for patient moral reflection?

I now turn to Hume's "moral" form of moderation between self-interest and justice, elaborated in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, to see whether he can offer a satisfactory answer to these questions.

Moral Moderation

To set the stage for my discussion of Hume's "moral" form of moderation as it pertains to his judgment of the Athens episode, I will need to situate it within his account of justice as an artificial virtue. For Hume, justice's foremost concern is the regulation of property, setting the rules for possession and transference in order to protect individuals with a legitimate claim to land or goods (such as inheritance or longest possession) against deceptive transactions and arbitrary seizures by their fellows. If it is possible on Hume's terms to read a concern for justice into the Athenians' proceedings, then such a concern would have to have minimally to do with their consideration for the legitimate property interests of their neighboring Grecians. They would have had to think, for some reason, that their neighbors were entitled to continued possession of their ships. Indeed, what societies that practice justice all seem to have in common is their recognition that an unfettered, solipsistic pursuit of property, whether on the part of individuals or entire societies, is in actuality an obstacle to securing it. They all seem to agree that it is by social cooperation alone that they are able to secure their coveted goods and dwell in a peaceable state of equality with their fellows. Although their primary motivation to seek justice may be a private interest in securing property,[9] they duly recognize and assent to something like a public interest as a useful guarantor of private interests. Something like this would have had to be on the table during the Athenian deliberations if they can be said to have considered the burning of their neighbors' ships as a question of justice.

But Hume's concept of justice is not only about the material security of property. While that may be its origin, its principle eventually comes to extend to other legal and moral matters as well. Moreover, he uses the term "artificial" with respect to justice not in the sense of being false or fake, but in the sense of having arisen from some convention. Artificial virtues are not forgeries or unnatural imitations

of more "natural" virtues, but inventions meeting needs that trace back to the passions of human nature. Hume thinks that justice as an artificial virtue is supposed to be a corrective for human nature's tendency to prefer "contiguous" objects (very impressive, immediately accessible) to "remote" objects (less impressive, less immediately accessible). The social is more remote than the personal, yet often in ethical affairs the more social option is the more just, and so the continued practice of just conventions is meant to offset human nature's tendency to be partial to the personal simply because it is nearer to hand. Hume looks at it this way: there is no denying that human beings are naturally inclined to love and take care of what is nearest them, and that their liberality typically extends no further than their blood relations. But where people of different families and diverse social customs live in proximity and depend on one another for commerce and a livelihood, remoter concerns about justice *must* become more immediate, lest our partial affections render us unfit for large society. Concern for public objects is not originally written into human nature, but it can be *instantiated* there through convention. Justice therefore goes to work on our partial affections so that distant objects start to take on a more personal importance for us. Without some semblance of justice, Hume thinks, human relations would lapse into the kind of pre-political, libertarian chaos theorized by the social contractarians, where everyone blindly chases his desires and guards his property as if he had a natural right to do so.[10]

Fulfilling Humean justice is not just about internalizing and practicing respect for material property as such, therefore. It is rather more about learning to curtail, through social cooperation, the self-partial passions that cause conflicts over property in the first place. The Athenians, then, would not just have had to recognize the property of their Grecian neighbors as an abstract entitlement, but would also have had to check their preference for their own immediate personal wellbeing in favor of a remoter scheme that promoted a broader interest, such as, for example, the peace and sense of security needed to ensure trade in the ports of the Grecian city-states. Hume readily acknowledges the personal inconvenience of having to check one's deepest-seated passions for the sake of a broader interest. Situations inevitably arise when the general demands of justice clash with the private passions of those concerned. Yet these cases in particular must be executed felicitously in order to promote the execution of the most beneficial cases. For when a society commits to upholding justice as an artificial virtue, it does not just do so for the sake of guaranteeing particular outcomes. Instead, it promotes the overall scheme of justice in the community, and if this takes some collateral damage along the way, causing pain to select individuals or even an entire group on occasion, nevertheless, it is deemed worth the cost, since the long-term benefits will presumably outweigh the short-term ones.

With characteristic skepticism, Hume doubts that human beings will uphold justice *in every case* in which it ought to be applied. He thinks it unreasonable to

expect that the artificial virtues will prevail in situations where the violent passions are provoked beyond the natural moderation of calm-passional deliberation. As I suggested in the previous section, there seem to exist for Hume certain objects that are so provocative to the violent passions that even the best-regulated minds have trouble deferring their immediate desire for them. My question at present is whether Hume's account of justice can address this seemingly foregone conclusion. Is there something that the artificial virtues add to the process of deliberation that could put justice back on the table, on Humean terms, for the ancient Athenians?

Rachel Cohon's work on Hume's moral philosophy provides a useful takeoff point. Cohon makes a meaningful distinction between "partial" and "universal" approbation in several of her commentaries on Book 3 of the *Treatise*.[11] She notices that one of the differences between what Hume calls the "natural" virtues and the artificial virtues is the disparity of approbation they receive in particular cases. We may admire our friend for showing the natural virtue of benevolence to his children, yet withhold the same approval from our nemesis, since no one likes to recognize the good qualities of his enemies. Because of this bias Hume detects in our perceptions, Cohon says, he also believes that we endorse the natural virtues on a case-by-case basis, depending on our degree of affection for the agents involved; whereas, when the question of justice is on the table, the bias of our affections no longer clouds our feelings of approbation. The right execution of justice may entail an unsatisfactory outcome for someone we dearly love, but even when that is the case, we nevertheless feel compelled to endorse it, since by endorsing a particular instance of justice we simultaneously endorse the overall scheme. In Cohon's words:

> Hume never worries that different individuals within a society (or even across societies) will disagree in their moral assessments of such traits as justice or fidelity to promises. He apparently expects complete unanimity of judgment about the artificial virtues. The reason for this seems to be that approval of the artificial virtues is the effect of sympathy with the whole society. In any given case, all observers occupy the same synoptic perspective when they sympathize, and so experience the same degree of pleasure or uneasiness in the same instances. There is of course the danger that an observer may confound her selfish interests with her sympathetic concern for society; but if she has attained sufficient discernment to distinguish these, her moral evaluation of any virtue or vice will match that of any other discriminating individual. ("Hume's Artificial and Natural Virtues," 268)

This "synoptic perspective" of sympathy Hume calls the "common point of view." Here is what he has to say about it in *Treatise* 3.3.1:

> One may, perhaps, be surpriz'd, that amidst all these interests and pleasures, we shou'd forget our own, which touch us so nearly on every other occasion. But we shall easily satisfy ourselves on this head, when we consider, that every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. (T 3.3.1.30; SBN 590)

For my purposes, I shall refer to this so-called "common point of view" as Hume's "moral" form of moderation, a sustained imaginative exercise that transforms our more remote concerns into our more immediate ones. "We must render the execution of justice our nearest interest, and its violation our most remote" (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537), Hume says elsewhere in Book 3, and we can only agree to do this when we take up a common perspective that compels our moral approbation in certain kinds of cases. In the proposal of this moral moderation, Hume finds in his moral theory a supplement to his passional theory. In the same way that calm reason tries to check the violent passions from acting out rashly, the common point of view tries to check self-interest from moral equivocation.

Returning to our case study, is it imaginable that the Athenians, at the behest of Aristides the Just, assumed this common point of view in conjunction with their calm passions in order to arrive at a considered rejection of Themistocles' plan? After receiving Hume's account of artificial justice, it is no longer unimaginable, at least. But let us complicate the matter even further by pointing out that Hume's account of justice seems to favor *intra-communal* relations ahead of *inter-communal* ones. When he speaks, in the *Treatise*, of taking up the common point of view, and having sympathy for the interests of others in society, he sometimes sounds as if he is only concerned with one society at a time, and not societies as they stand in relation to each other. Can justice actually demand that one's sympathies extend beyond one's nominal political borders? Would it even have been valid, on Humean terms, for Aristides to claim that the Athenians could do an *injustice* against the neighboring Grecians, when their worry ought to have been primarily for the livelihood of their own community?

Frederick Whelan offers compelling evidence in his analyses of Hume's other political writings that Hume's conception of justice is weighted heavily, though not exclusively, toward the intra-communal.[12] According to Whelan, Hume's treatment of the "laws of nations," in his *History of England* and elsewhere, falls consistently on the side of the "reason of state" doctrine, or the preferential ethical treatment of the national ahead of the international community. Whelan refers to this as Hume's "double standard" in his writings on justice. It is a double standard because, as we now know, in relations between individuals of the same community,

Hume sees the utility of taking up a common point of view for the sake of public justice, while in relations between different political communities, he allows a level of moral license among political actors that would not be allowed in intra-communal transactions. Just consider Hume's treatment of international justice in T 3.2.11. There, he writes that a body politic fits into the international sphere similarly to how an individual fits into the national sphere. Neighboring nations' concern for peace, commerce, and mutual benefit encourage them to "extend to different kingdoms the same notions of justice, which take place among individuals" (T 3.2.11.2; SB 567–68). But while the abstract notions may be the same, the moral obligation of justice is not the same internationally as it is locally. "[H]ere we may observe," Hume continues,

> that tho' the intercourse of different states be advantageous, and even sometimes necessary, yet it is not so necessary nor advantageous as that among individuals, without which 'tis utterly impossible for human nature ever to subsist. Since, therefore, the *natural* obligation to justice, among different states, is not so strong as among individuals, the *moral* obligation, which arises from it, must partake of its weakness; and we must necessarily give a greater indulgence to a prince or minister, who deceives another, than to a private gentleman, who breaks his word of honour. (T 3.2.11.4; SBN 568–69)

Sticking to the passional origin of justice, Hume asserts that the moral obligations between nations are weaker because they depend on each other to a lesser degree than individuals depend on each other. It now seems very unlikely that he could view the preservation of justice as the primary motive of the deliberators. The moral moderation that governs intra-communal moral judgments, due to men's partiality of affections and limited generosity, is weaker, normatively speaking, beyond the outer borders of society. Moreover, just as with the natural form of moderation, it is impossible to set a stable arithmetical proportion to it:

> Shou'd it be ask'd *what proportion these two species of morality* (i.e., individual and international) *bear to each other*? I wou'd answer, that this is a question, to which we can never give any precise answer; nor is it possible to reduce to numbers the proportion, which we ought to fix betwixt them. One may safely affirm, that this proportion finds itself, without any art or study of men. (T 3.2.11.5; SBN 569)

Even considered from the point of view of the morality in Book 3, then, Hume's judgment that the Athenians were not concerned about inter-communal (international) justice remains consistent. But this raises the question of whether Hume

has a political supplement for the limitations of his moral and natural forms of moderation. If neither calm deliberation nor moralization could have insured that the Athenians would not have decided, imprudently, to burn the Grecian ships, then what recourse was left them, in the absence of a "wise" or "right" choice, to take the most prudent course of action?

Political Moderation

Both the natural and the moral forms of moderation contain the possibility of altering the basic direction of the passions in order to secure either some future advantage or moral good. In the case of natural moderation, the calm passions work against the more violent ones in attempt to secure longer-term satisfactions. But this idea hits its limit upon consideration of such objects as may incite the violent passions past the point of calm self-restraint. It is similar with moral moderation. The universal approbation of justice countervails self-interest for the sake of equity, yet encounters a limit at the borders of kingdoms, where the natural partiality of human beings' affections once again reasserts itself with full force. In different ways, therefore, these forms of moderation fail to provide an adequate explanation of the Athenian episode. They reveal a need for a higher mode of direction for the errant passions and moral myopia of human nature, one that we might call *political* as distinct from moral or passional. This is the problem that I will take up in this final section.

Hume says, in T 3.2.2.13 (SBN 492), that there is no passion "capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction." Jacqueline Taylor expounds on this claim, concluding that for Hume, no appeal to artificial morality can fully explain human beings' original motives to action, since the former are but the byproducts of our passional natures. Should we seek to spread our moral sentiments into a broader jurisdiction, she observes, we must first alter the *force* or *direction* of our natural affections. Practicing artificial virtue can assist us in this. The repeated enforcement of the overall system of justice for the sake of safeguarding private interests alters, over time, the force and direction of those desires.[13] Those who have a personal stake in justice learn to have sympathy for its consistent execution. This creates what Taylor calls a "reciprocity of convention and character," or the transformation of justice into a legitimate *motivator* (as opposed to being merely a controller) of passional action. Such reciprocity is what I mean by Hume's "political" form of moderation.

But to which actors ought we properly to assign the responsibility of self-reflexive moral redirection—another way of defining political moderation—that Taylor describes?[14] How does moral redirection function in cases where the composite passional disposition of a *society* (albeit a limitedly enfranchised society of male Athenians) is in question? This is where I think the Athens episode in T

2.3.6 can make a significant contribution to the analysis of an aspect of Hume's philosophy that gets overlooked when scholars attempt to analyze his moral theory separately from a grounded social context. For to whom does Hume credit the capacity to redirect the moral sentiments of the Athenians? It is not to the constituents themselves, as democratically empowered, deliberating individuals, but to their leaders. On Hume's reading, it is *Themistocles* who is held responsible for failing to fire up the rabble sufficiently to act, and *Aristides* whom Hume judges too pedantic to make the case for justice. The lackluster response of the Athenians is a direct reflection of the underwhelming influence of their elected leaders on their passions. Hume's judgment here is perfectly consistent with his understanding of how political leaders influence group action, a matter on which he elaborates in T 3.2.7 (SBN 534). Here he asserts, as he does elsewhere, that one of the origins of government lies in an infirmity of human nature, in which the greater good, if that good is further off, seems less preferable than an immediate good I see before me, and is, thereby, less tempting for me to pursue. Governments come into existence to correct our harmful propensity to prefer personal convenience to social utility. Their main objective is to guide their subjects on a superior course than the one they would choose for themselves if left to their own devices.[15] There is a class of "a few," our governors, "whom we . . . immediately interest in the execution of justice," and it is these few who can direct the impressionable passions of the majority toward justice:

> 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 change their situation, and render the observance of justice the immediate interest of some particular persons, and its violation their more remote. These persons, then, are not only induc'd to observe those rules in their own conduct, but also to constrain others to a like regularity, and inforce the dictates of equity thro' the whole society. (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537)

This suggests that the political form of moderation which establishes reciprocity between justice and natural affection must be realized through some kind of hierarchical structuring of political authority.[16] To expect that the majority of people will endeavor to self-correct their natural propensities toward the contiguous is "impracticable" (T 3.2.7.6; SB 537). We need but authorize a few governors whose vocation it is to execute justice, and let them try to arrange the circumstances of political life with a view to those essential public objects that so often vanish from the immediate scope of the common people's vision.

While hardly a polemic for a direct, deliberative democracy of equals, Hume's political form of moderation offers a preliminary answer to the question of which

distribution of political authority is needed for the optimal direction of intra-communal conduct. In the absence of a purely deliberative or a purely moral solution to the Athenians' dilemma, Hume proposes an ultimate political check against the violent passions and localized moral sense of human beings. If the lackluster leadership of Themistocles and Aristides failed, on Hume's reading, to efficaciously direct the conduct of the Athenians in one direction or the other, then this "noted passage" of ancient history can be read, not just as a case study for how eloquent oratory can influence the violent passions, as Hume and many Hume scholars[17] have tended to read it, but as a parable par excellence about the preeminent role political leadership plays for Hume in determining group consensus.

Of course, by proposing such a reading I am indirectly commenting on what I take to be Hume's implicit skepticism toward the Athenians' democratic methods of deliberating about public issues. So much is my intention. I see two possible judgments of what his skepticism means in this context, one rather critical, one more cautious. First the critical judgment: Hume's claim that a small cadre of governors ultimately steers society's conduct in the absence of motivational and moral determinacy among the people suggests that he finds it doubtful that societies can optimize public utility by way of direct democratic deliberations such as those normalized by the Athenians. From this critical reading, Hume might then be accused of leaning too heavily on the political models of his own time for his naturalistic theory of government, as if by acknowledging the directive efficacy of oligarchic or technocratic institutions (such as may more closely resemble those of English or French monarchs than those of ancient Athenian democrats), Hume is merely seeing the "nature" nearest him, so to speak, and not human nature more generally.[18] Still, despite his skepticism about the efficacy of the democratic mode of deliberation, Hume does leave room for a thought in democracy's favor: Had Themistocles been authorized to act absolutely on his design to burn the other Grecian ships, without having first to consult the people who would carry out the deed, this notable passage of ancient history would have ended quite differently. On the other side of the danger of mobilizing the democratic masses in pursuit of rash or violent ends, then, is a kind of democratic inertia, a reluctance on the part of the body politic to move unless sufficiently provoked. This democratic inertia with respect to collective action also appears to have played an important role in restraining Themistocles from leading Athens down a morally disastrous path—a role that Hume himself underestimates. Such a democratic delay on military mobilization would seem a pretty wise constitutional provision if we were to accept Hume's account that Aristides' moral entreaties fell flat because he asked the Athenians to extend their conception of justice inter-communally.

But the more cautious judgment, and the one I would endorse for the time being, would point out the need for continued reflection on the questions raised by Hume's analysis in *Treatise* 2.3.6. I am intrigued but still unsure what to make

of the fact that Hume thinks the Athenians made the 'right' decision about the ships despite being utterly lacking in moral concern for their neighbors. He writes of their decision not to burn up the ships as if it were a fortuitous accident that followed from the failure of their leaders to persuade them to act either self-partially or morally. This indeed opens the possibility that political moderation itself is as fragile as the other two forms of moderation, that when leaders fail to direct their people effectively, it too, fluctuates in indeterminacy. And if this is the case, then there would have to be some higher form yet that actually maintains the balance between inefficacious elite leadership and an indeterminate popular will. But what would such a form of moderation be called, and what conclusions would have to follow from accepting its ultimate efficacy in regulating political affairs? These questions, while provocative, are the subject matter of another paper.[19]

Conclusion

I have now offered a reading of Hume that connects a chain of three "forms of moderation"—the natural (passional), the moral, and the political—and discussed their importance in Books 2 and 3 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. I have referred, somewhat exhaustively, to the episode treated in T 2.3.6, "Of the influence of the imagination on the passions," because it provides a singularly magnified view into the complex relationship between motivation, morality, and politics in Hume's philosophy. I hope that I have not only made the case that the various forms of moderation explain the constant oscillation (of which Hume himself is conscious) between the violence of the passions and the obligations of morality, but also that Hume tries to reconcile them with each other as he transitions his discussion from the private to the moral to the political spheres. In summary, then, natural moderation deals with passional motivation in the broadest sense and applies to individuals in all contexts, while moral moderation narrows the focus to matters of justice versus injustice within a contained moral jurisdiction. The former two ultimately get resolved into a political form of moderation, the highest order of action that Hume acknowledges in his theory, which, in my reading, serves as a final political solvent for the challenge of responsibly directing the fluctuating passions of human nature.

NOTES

I would like to thank Jeffrey Tlumak and Elizabeth Radcliffe for their commentaries on earlier versions of this article.

1 References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph

number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

2 Plutarch, "The Life of Themistocles." Here is the episode quoted in full: "But Themistocles cherished yet greater designs even for securing the naval supremacy. When the fleet of the Hellenes, after the departure of Xerxes, had put in at Pagasae and was wintering there, he made a harangue before the Athenians, in which he said that he had a certain scheme in mind which would be useful and salutary for them, but which could not be broached in public. So the Athenians bade him impart it to Aristides alone, and if he should approve of it, to put it into execution. Themistocles accordingly told Aristides that he purposed to burn the fleet of the Hellenes where it lay; but Aristides addressed the people, and said of the scheme which Themistocles pursued to carry out, that none could be either more advantageous or more iniquitous. The Athenians therefore ordered Themistocles to give it up."

3 It would also be possible to infer, given Aristides' longstanding political rivalry with Themistocles, an important fact that Hume neglects to mention, that the former might have "planted" this thought in the citizens' minds in order to move their conduct in a direction he himself preferred.

4 As an example, Hume quotes the "late celebrated historian," Monsieur Rollin, as saying: "Here they are not philosophers, to whom 'tis easy in their schools to establish the finest maxims and most sublime rules of morality, who decide that interest ought never to prevail above justice. 'Tis a whole people interested in the proposal, which is made to them, who consider it as of importance to the public good, and who notwithstanding reject it unanimously, and without hesitation, merely because it is contrary to justice." See T 2.3.6.4 (SBN 425–26).

5 I should clarify here that I am taking Hume's term "general notion" in the same sense as his term "abstract idea" in T 1.1.6.1, where, endorsing Berkeley's account of the very same, he writes: "[a great philosopher] has asserted, that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annex'd to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them" (SBN 15–16). Taking "general notion" in this sense, I read Hume as saying that the general notion of advantage given by Aristides *could* have been an efficacious motivator had it been perceived to have any immediate bearing on the particular interests of the Athenian people. That particularity being absent, it was therefore received virtually dispassionately, as an abstraction too remote for their concern.

6 See Hume's two proofs for this thesis in T 2.3.2 (SBN 407), "Of the influencing motives of the will."

7 It might seem, at first reading, that Hume contradicts something he says just a few pages earlier, in T 2.3.4.9 (SBN 422), regarding how incompletely disclosed objects tend to exacerbate the passions more violent than fully disclosed ones: "'Tis certain nothing more powerfully animates any affection, than to conceal some part of its object by throwing it into a kind of shade, which at the same time that it shews enough to prepossess us in favour of the object, leaves still some work for the imagination. Besides that obscurity is always attended with a kind of uncertainty; the effort, which the fancy makes to compleat the idea, rouzes the spirits, and gives an additional force to the passion." There is no contradiction, however. In this comment, Hume is assuming

that the object is already engaging the affections in a particularized way, so that, in remaining partially "shaded," it excites the imagination to attach further associations to it. In the Athens episode, by contrast, the object presented to the Athenians never engages them except as a "general notion" remote from their particular circumstances, and thus never attains that affective strength that would enliven the imagination.

8 Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 31.

9 That said, remembering Hume's earlier remarks in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, they may also be motivated by some private quest to attain the natural virtue of being agreeable and useful to others. See T 3.3.1.1 (SBN 574), as well as T 3.3.3.1 (SBN 602).

10 Hume is critical of the social contractarians' dependency on the "idle fiction" of the "state of nature." He is also suspicious of the veracity of what the poets call the "golden age." "[T]he former is describ'd as full of war, violence, and injustice; whereas the latter is painted out to us, as the most charming and most peaceable condition, that can possibly be imagin'd" (T 3.2.2.15; SBN 493–94). Hume's critique is by no means dismissive, however. He recognizes the utility of these myths for showing "the origin of those [artificial] virtues, which are the subjects of our present enquiry" (T 3.2.2.16; SBN 494–95). The golden age myth in particular perceives that 'if every man had a tender regard for another, or if nature supplied abundantly all our wants and desires, that the jealousy of interest, which justice supposes, could no longer have place; nor would there be any occasion for those distinctions and limits of property and possession, which at present are in use among mankind" (ibid).

11 See Cohon, "Hume's Artificial and Natural Virtues" and Cohon, "The Common Point of View."

12 See Whelan, "Hume on the Laws of Nations." Cf. Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli.*

13 Taylor, "Justice and the Foundations of Social Morality."

14 Taylor's more recent work on the distribution of social power in Hume's moral philosophy, while it does not speak directly to my questions here, nevertheless provides an interesting supplement to my discussion, shedding light on how differently empowered moral agents may deliberate in different ways and arrive at different judgments. See especially chapter 3, "Social Power and the Philosophy of Passions," in Taylor, *Reflecting Subjects*.

15 Annette Baier puts it well when she describes the origin of government for Hume as "the failure of our imaginations to serve our interested passions." See chapter 10, "The Shelter of Governors," in Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 258.

16 For a fuller treatment of Hume on government, see Cohon, "The Shackles of Virtue," 215–38.

17 Baier's reading in chapter 7 of *A Progress of Sentiments* (170–71) along with Rawls's *Lectures*, for examples of how scholars tend to take Hume concerning this section.

18 It is worth noting here that Hume's remarks on democracy elsewhere are characteristically measured and not categorically dismissive. He considers the scale and jurisdiction of a particular polity to be important factors in its governance. He is open to the prospect that a mixed or "limited" form of government might be the best for a large monarchy that is divided into many subordinate counties. "Even under absolute

princes," he writes in "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," 'the subordinate government of cities is commonly republican; while that of counties and provinces is monarchical. . . . In a large government, which is modelled with masterly skill, there is compass and room enough to refine the democracy, from the lower people, who may be admitted into the first elections or first concoction of the commonwealth, to the higher magistrates, who direct all the movements" (240–52).

19 From Hume's essay "On the Original Contract," where he dismisses the contractarian notion than an original consent by the governed is the source of political sovereignty, we can at least rule out the notion that the original consent of the people to their rulers might hold inefficacious governments accountable to them: "I maintain, that human affairs will never admit of this consent; seldom of the appearance of it. But that conquest or usurpation, that is, in plain terms, force, by dissolving the ancient governments, is the origin of almost all the new ones, which were ever established in the world" (170). Of the so-called government "by consent of the people" of ancient Athens Hume remarks that the laws of that city, to which all were subject, were passed by not a tenth-part of its citizens, and that Athens made undemocratic claims of conquest upon other cities' territories all the time. "And," he adds, "as it is well known, that popular assemblies in that city were always full of license and disorder, notwithstanding the institutions and laws by which they were checked: How much more disorderly must they prove, where they form not the established constitution, but meet tumultuously on the dissolution of the ancient government, in order to give rise to a new one?" (170).

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