

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

The Fragility of Liberalism:
David Hume and the Problem of Virtue

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Department of Politics

School of Arts and Sciences

Of The Catholic University of America

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Washington, D.C.

2011

The Fragility of Liberalism: David Hume and the Problem of Virtue

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David Hume has often been seen as a representative of interest-based liberalism, as distinct from, for example, Lockean, rights-based liberalism or Kantian, autonomy-based liberalism. This dissertation considerably revises or qualifies this interpretation by demonstrating that in Hume's political theory virtues play a significant role in motivating compliance with rules.

The dissertation shows the importance of a distinction between interest as justifying rationale and interest as direct motive. Hume's argument for liberal institutions is essentially based on considerations of self-interest. However, he has deep reservations about self-interest being the motive for action. Given Hume's theory of reason and passion, he cannot expect people to be always clearheaded and to be constantly calculating relative advantage. Only preexisting, unreflective dispositional tendencies can ensure and explain strict rule-following. These dispositions form the core of liberal virtues.

What is special about Hume's account of liberal virtues is that he juxtaposes the self-interest motive and the virtuous motive and has to explain their relationship. The typical liberal idea of the self-interest motive, understood as involving autonomous rational agency and reflective calculation, conflicts with the dispositional view of the

virtuous motive. But Hume's notion of the self-interest motive is context-dependent, and the interests in the concrete contexts are diverse and heterogeneous. This particularized sense of interest is more like an unreflective tendency than a reflective calculation. As such it plays a major role in the formation of the corresponding virtuous motive and gradually gives place to the latter. The dissertation brings out that a stable liberal order cannot rely on either voluntary commitment or rational calculation, but depends on virtuous tendencies widely possessed by a people. These virtuous tendencies are shaped primarily through habituation, and their formation involves a protracted historical development and a particular way of life.

This dissertation by Nong Cheng fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in politics approved by Claes G. Ryn, Ph.D., as Director, and by David J. Walsh, Ph.D., and Stephen F. Schneck, Ph.D., as Readers.

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Chapter One: Introduction	1
The Problem of Motivation in Liberal Thought	2
Hume’s Time and Life	8
Hume’s Virtues as Motivating Dispositions	11
Hume and Interest-Based Liberalism.....	21
The Will, Calculating Interest, and Virtuous Dispositions	28
Chapter Two: Hume’s Critique of Social Contract Theory	36
Two Strains of Thought in Social Contract Theory	38
Hume’s Critique of Social Contract Theory	44
Interest Theory versus Voluntarism.....	50
The Interest-Based Reasoning of the Rationale for Government	55
The Problem of Motivation in Relation to the Origin of Allegiance	62
The Problem of Motivation in Relation to the Maintenance of Allegiance.....	69
Chapter Three: The Unreliability of the Motive of Rational Self-Interest	77
Interest as a Political Concept.....	78
Self-Interest as “the First Motive”	83
The Passion of Self-Interest	86
The Problems with the Model of Rational Subject.....	96
Weaknesses of Human Nature	105
Calm Passions and Strength of Mind.....	111

Chapter Four: Shaping the Dispositional State of Artificial Virtues	120
Hume's Conception of Virtue	122
The Ambiguity in Hume's Account of Artificial Virtues	126
"A Sense of Interest"	134
Habituation and "the Effects of Custom"	144
Chapter Five: Liberal Virtues and Commercial Society as a Way of Life	164
A Dispositional Account of Social Causation and Human Agency	165
The Involuntary Nature of Virtues.....	174
The Diversity of Ways of Life	180
Tranquilizing Passions and the Status of Avarice.....	184
The Commercial Way of Life and the Liberal Personality.....	189
Conclusion	195
Bibliography	200

Abbreviations
(For Hume's Works)

DP	<i>A Dissertation on the Passions</i>
EHU	<i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>
EPM	<i>An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals</i>
E	<i>Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary</i>
HE	<i>The History of England</i>
L	<i>The Letters of David Hume</i>
T	<i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>

Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor and dissertation director, Claes Ryn, whose guidance is the most important source of my interest in the moral problem in politics and of my concern with the historical dimension of moral and political life. I am also grateful for his patience and understanding and much other help throughout my dissertation work.

I want to thank professors Graham Walker, David Walsh, Stephen Schneck, Richard Velkley, Bradley Lewis, and Roy Tsao. Their teaching has shaped my understanding of political theory in one way or another. Also indispensable to me was the support and help of Dr Hanna Marks. Additional thanks go to my fellow students, Philip Harold, Steven Brust, and Joanne Tetlow, whose kindness and friendship means a great deal to me.

Thanks also to the Earhart Foundation for greatly appreciated financial support, without which this dissertation work would have been much more difficult.

Finally, special thanks to my dear wife, Aichun Lei. Without her support and sacrifice the completion of this work would have been impossible.

Chapter One

Introduction

The full appreciation of David Hume as a great thinker was essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. In his own time, Hume was admired largely because of his essays and his *History of England*. Although it was well known that his skepticism awakened Kant from his “dogmatic slumber,” Hume’s positive teaching in philosophy had not been acknowledged until the appearance of Norman Smith’s classical exposition of Hume’s naturalism in the early twentieth century.¹ As regards the significance of Hume’s political thought, the recognition came even later. For almost two hundred years after his death Hume’s political thought was mentioned largely for his criticism of social contract theory. The appreciation of his positive political doctrine had to wait until after the Second World War, and Hayek, who, stressing the significance of the evolution of social arrangements, gave enthusiastic praise in a 1963 lecture, was typical, “Hume gives us probably the only comprehensive statement of the legal and political philosophy which later became known as liberalism.”² The situation has been gradually turned around since the 1970s. Beginning with Duncan Forbes’s important study, a series of works drew

¹ Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1941).

² F. A. Hayek, “The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume,” in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappel (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 340.

attention to Hume as a complex and political theorist.³ As one scholar put it in 2007, “It is now increasingly common to present the British tradition of political philosophy as going from Thomas Hobbes to John Locke to Hume to John Stuart Mill.”⁴

This dissertation examines Hume’s account of the significance of virtues for a liberal society, which is a relatively little discussed aspect of Hume’s thought. This general topic can be approached from different angles. My focus will be on the role of Hume’s notion of virtues in motivating people to comply with various general rules in a liberal society.

The Problem of Motivation in Liberal Thought

All types of societies need to ensure that their members comply with norms. There is something peculiar about ensuring compliance with rules for the liberal society, however. The liberal society essentially depends on a system (or systems) of general rules to maintain peace and promote prosperity. Theoretically speaking, the liberal society arises from the attempt to mediate conflicts of interest among non-intimates or strangers. While family ties, closely knit communities, local traditions, or religious confessions might play a significantly political role in maintaining peace and order in pre-modern

³ Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). For a list of the important works on Hume’s political thought since the 1970s, see Knud Haakonssen, “The Structure of Hume’s Political Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed. ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Russell Hardin, *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

societies, the ambition of the liberal society is to build up a political order across numerous narrow or local groups. Although liberal thought can assign important roles to various traditional factors, what a liberal society directly relies on to secure peace and order is a system of general rules. That is why compliance with general rules is of fundamental importance to the liberal society. Thus we have the problem of motivation. What motivates people to a general policy of cooperation with the social system? What motivates them to follow general rules? How can we make sure that this compliance be both common and stable? These are questions liberalism has to face.

Yet there is a further reason why we need to take up this problem of motivation in a liberal society: that is, typical liberal thought seems poorly equipped to handle this problem. The typical imagination of liberalism envisions the so-called sovereign individual who throws off the yoke of tradition, community and religion and declares himself to be self-determining. Without supernatural guidance or traditional custom to appeal to for moral sources, liberalism has to confine itself to the individual's self-determination. The source for compliance is located within human desires and reasoning ability. Liberalism excluded the pursuit of human perfection from the political arena and thought it more realistic to build a stable order on the basis of the most common and compelling part of human nature: the desires for safety, physical comfort, and material prosperity. Liberalism can go in the direction of voluntarism, stressing moral incentive arising from the rational will and its promise, but more typically it features instrumental rationality and prudence, proposing calculating self-interest as a source of motivation for compliance. Either way, the diversity of desires and passions is downplayed, and the old, richer understanding of human nature is reduced to the modern notion of the rational

subject. Rational commitment or prudential calculation is widely assumed to be a sufficiently powerful motive for maintaining a liberal order.

However, neither rational capacity nor the desire for safety can necessarily prevail over violent and pernicious passions. When people are clear-headed, they will follow their impelling desires, but this presupposition about clear-headedness itself has entailed a normative requirement. Unfortunately, this implication of early liberalism has been widely ignored. The prevailing impression was rather that as long as we base political systems on the low but compelling part of human nature we do not have to worry about the problem of motivation any more. Little time and energy needs to be spent in improving human nature; our attention should be focused on the search for effective institutions. There is a feeling that the artful contrivances of liberal institutions can reduce the moral requirements for citizens to the minimum level. On the basis of the lowest common denominator of human nature, institutional arrangements could channel destructive passions and ensure wide rule-following. As liberalism grew into maturity, this reductionist understanding of human motivation became a fixed feature of liberal thinking. The preeminence of the model of *Homo Economicus* is a typical instance.

This situation has created a split between justifying reasons and direct motives in contemporary liberal theory, which devotes tremendous energy to justifying liberal principles and institutional arrangements, but pays much less attention to the problem of motivation. Both utilitarianism and deontology, the two dominant approaches in moral and political theory of our time, justify their institutional designs in terms of reasons which are external to the subjective motivational set of human agents. Those justifying reasons proceed from a universal and detached point of view, which may be suitable for

rationalistic argumentation, but is clearly independent of the actual motives of real people. Take contemporary contractualism as an example. It no longer takes contracting as an actual occurrence but as a hypothetical process. Through this expository device it justifies institutions by means of the imagined rational choice of the rational agents situated in an artificially defined situation. The idealistic agents involved in this hypothetical agreement do not have much to do with the common people in actual life. The separation between justifications and actual human motives cannot be more extreme.⁵

Obviously, the problem of motivation cannot be addressed by the rationalist version of liberalism that is obsessed with the Enlightenment project of justifying liberalism from a detached point of view. However, this version of liberalism prevailed only in relatively recent times and primarily in the context of analytic philosophy. In the early stage of the development of liberalism, the intellectual situation was much more complicated. Although the problematic elements of liberal formulation as mentioned above can all be traced back to this period, classical liberalism involved many other aspects. For one thing, for all their reductionist tendencies, early modern accounts of liberty were usually much more substantial. For another, despite the emerging Enlightenment rationalism, various versions of liberalism during this period were more or less connected with metaphysical or theological traditions.⁶ Although Hobbes and Locke reduced political purposes to securing life, liberty and property, their accounts of liberal

⁵ Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 14 (August 1976): 453–66.

⁶ This whole paragraph is indebted to the discussion in David Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1997), especially pt. 2. Also see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

morality still draw greatly on the existing ethical sources, especially the Christian tradition.⁷ In the cases of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, dissatisfaction with the earlier lowering of morality produced successive efforts to reestablish the moral vision. These attempts all try to account for liberal morality by developing comprehensive accounts of nature, reason and history.⁸ In the nineteenth century, Tocqueville and Mill both gave prominence to character formation and both were concerned with the role of religion in moral and political life.

As we have seen above, rationalist speculation about liberal principles from a detached point of view, as exemplified in analytic political philosophy, has lost sight of the substantial existence of human beings. To find the sources of motivation, the search for the foundation of liberalism must go to the experiential level. It must be more substantive and engage with concrete practice. There are different ways to go about this search. One may conceive of liberalism as a self-contained and self-referring practice and attempt to find moral sources within this range. For example, the liberal order can be seen as embodying a substantive way of life, which has its own particular set of goods such as life, freedom and property and pursues a correlative set of virtues. As one exponent puts it, “Liberalism contains within itself the resources it needs to declare and to defend a

⁷ See, for example, Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), chap. 1–2. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Nathan Tarcov, *Locke’s Education for Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁸ See, for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. and trans. Peter Gay (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the end of reason: on the moral foundation of Kant’s critical philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel’s social theory: actualizing freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

conception of the good life that is in no way truncated or contemptible.” Liberalism does not depend upon “the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and moral philosophy.”⁹ By contrast, one may stress the incomplete character of liberal practice, going beyond it and tracing liberal convictions back to the traditional sources such as ancient ontology or Christian religion. The role of religion as a source of support for liberal morality is widely discussed; attempts to defend liberalism in terms of the ancient understanding of nature are also not unusual.¹⁰ In a more systematic way, one theorist even maintains that liberal democracy is the offspring of ancient philosophy and Christian religion—liberal philosophy can be read as “a differentiation of the subjective or interior dimension of the earlier traditions.” “[T]he liberal tradition is not a self-contained persuasion but is in continuity with the discovery of the soul through philosophy and its transcendent fulfillment through revelation.”¹¹

Hume, like other classical liberal thinkers, develops a quite comprehensive account of humanity and liberal society. But he treats the liberal order as essentially self-contained, thus being closer to the first approach as just mentioned.¹² He intends to locate the moral sources in the non-rational part of human nature, and more relevant to our topic, his account of liberal virtues confronts the problem of motivation head on.

⁹ William Galston, “Defending Liberalism,” *The American Political Science Review* 76 (1982): 629.

¹⁰ For example, see Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and nature: an Aristotelian defense of liberal order* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Pub., 1991).

¹¹ David Walsh, *The Liberal Soul*, 7&4.

¹² Hume’s view on religion is certainly a controversial issue. But while he has remarks concerning the positive role of religion in human life in other writings, Hume’s systematic account of morality and politics is essentially separated from his discussion of religion.

Hume's Time and Life

Hume never personally got involved in any great historical events. But as an eighteenth-century thinker, he witnessed a time of great transformation. Although this period was characterized as the “Old Regime” by the later revolutionaries, in Hume’s eyes, an enlightened civilization appeared in Western Europe in this early modern age. A significant breakthrough was made in the arts and sciences; a property order was shaped; the rule of law was formed; personal liberty was established; administration became regular; authority became centralized in government; and national and international commerce was becoming the new basis of political society. If we understand the liberal order in a strict sense, namely, as distinct from a democratic regime, then this was a time moving toward the establishment of liberty. At least this is the way Hume sees it. “Liberty is the perfection of civil society” (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 41).

The intellectual world was also undergoing significant change. The traditional ideas about nature and God faced serious challenge. A naturalist and rationalist outlook was taking center stage. Largely due to the impact of the emerging natural sciences, a mechanical and causal understanding of the world prevailed over the inherited teleological point of view. Rational reasoning and experimental observation became the dominant approaches to the study of human nature and the world.

As a result of this intellectual transition, moral perfection was no longer the goal of politics, and the naturalness of political society was called into question. Starting with Grotius’s natural law doctrine and culminating in the social contract theory of Hobbes and Locke, political society was regarded as an artificial product of human reason and

will, and government devoted itself to securing personal safety, peace and comfortable living. This theory asserts the natural independence of the individual and the instrumental nature of government, thus establishing a conceptual framework for liberalism.

In the extreme cases such as Hobbes, the natural man was also deprived of the teleological nature. The natural man was understood as a creature of impulse and passion and the explanation of human nature relies on a theory of mechanical causation. This view provoked the century-long moral debate among British thinkers as to the naturalness of self-love or benevolence. Although the teleological and metaphysical view still played an important role, one remarkable feature of this debate was the attempt “to account for normativity in a way consistent with an empirical psychology and naturalist metaphysics.” This development results in the British “empirical naturalist tradition” in modern moral thought.¹³ The sentimental theory of morality also belongs to this tradition, which was initiated by Shaftesbury and developed by Hutcheson, trying to locate the source of morality within sentiment and passions.

Although the rationalist and naturalist outlook had increasingly become the mainstream of moral and political theory since the seventeenth century, the sensitivity to social, cultural and historical dimensions of human life was also rapidly emerging in the eighteenth century. Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* represented an early achievement in this regard. The Scottish Enlightenment made remarkable progress in the understanding of society, recognizing the mechanism of the free market and discovering stages of civilization by means of “philosophical history” or “natural history.” Although

¹³ Both the term “empirical naturalist tradition” and the description of its feature in the previous sentence are from Stephen Darwall. See his *The British Moralists and the Internal ‘Ought’: 1640-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14–15.

it had to wait for Burke and Hegel to give a fuller account of history, the achieved sense of social and historical complexity was strong enough to undermine the dominance of social contract theory. Instead of the voluntaristic notions of natural right, promise and contract, political understanding paid more attention to custom, convention and utility.

Hume was born into a lawyer's family in Edinburgh in 1711, and spent his childhood in his hometown Ninewells. At a very early age he received his college education at the University of Edinburgh and finished the coursework in 1725. Not following his family's advice to pursue a career in law, he was attracted only to philosophy. In the following ten years, he devoted himself entirely to reading and contemplation, being led to a "new scene of thought."

In 1734, he tried to be more active in life, leaving Scotland for England and then France. During his stay in France in 1734–1737, he completed the manuscript of his masterpiece — *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Then he returned to London and had the first two books of the *Treatise* published in 1739 and the third book in 1740. To his deep disappointment, the *Treatise* received very little attention, much less appreciation.

Hume returned to Scotland and stayed there for a few years. He published his first two volumes of essays dealing with moral and political issues in the next two years. Hume was a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment and active in the intellectual life of Scotland. However, he tried twice to get an academic position but both attempts failed largely because of his reputation as an atheist and a skeptic. In mid and late 1740s, Hume tried several temporary positions such as tutor to an aristocrat, secretary of a general, and secretary of a diplomat. During this period a rewritten version of the first book of the *Treatise*, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, appeared in 1748. Three years

later, a rewritten version of the third book of the *Treatise*, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* also came off the press.

In 1752, he published another volume of essays, *Political Discourses*, which treated issues of political economy and won him much attention. The same year, he was appointed Keeper of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh. This position enabled him to command a large library and to work on a huge project, *History of England*, which was published in six volumes from 1754 to 1762 and eventually became a best-seller. In his last years, he stayed in Scotland, enjoying the company of friends and revising his previous works. He died in 1776. Before his death, he arranged for the publication of *The Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion*, which appeared in 1779 and became his most controversial work.

Hume's Virtues as Motivating Dispositions

Even a cursory glance at Book 3 of the *Treatise* indicates that Hume's moral theory and political theory are inextricably intertwined with each other. The central part of Hume's moral thought is his sentimentalist theory of moral judgment and his theory of virtues, whereas the central part of his political thought is the theory of justice and property and that of government and allegiance. In their most systematic presentation in the *Treatise*, these theories are combined into a single account in Book 3, "Of Morals." From the perspective of political theory, Hume's approach is to explain social and political institutions (such as the property order) in terms of convention and rules and to

explain convention and rules in terms of acts and properties of individuals.¹⁴ The importance accorded to the properties of agents in this approach allows Hume to explore the problem of motivation, and virtues come into the picture as one kind of these properties. On the other hand, from the perspective of virtue theory, Hume understands virtue in terms of motive. In particular, as regards the group of virtues directly relevant to our topic, the virtues of justice, fidelity, and allegiance, he clearly understands them essentially as motivating dispositions in sustaining the social and political institutions.

Hume's understanding of virtues and their relation to liberal rules will be examined in detail in later chapters. Now in order to set the stage for this examination, we need to consider a few features of Hume's theory which are directly relevant to the following discussion.

First of all, a review of the fundamental character of Hume's philosophy is required. "[T]he establishment of a pure naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instincts is the determining factor in Hume's philosophy."¹⁵ Hume follows empiricism's emphasis on sensation, but criticizes its view of the function of reason. He shows the inadequacy of the principles of Locke and Berkeley in accounting for experience, and demonstrates that our beliefs regarding the existence of the external world, of our unified identity, and of the objective validity of causality all lack rational foundation. Yet he does not end up a radical skeptic, but turns

¹⁴ Francis Snare, *Morals, Motivation, and Convention: Hume's Influential Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 283 & 246–47.

¹⁵ Norman Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume (I)," *Mind*, New Series 14, no. 54 (April 1905): 151. Also see his book, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

to non-rational parts of human nature and develops a new positive account, arguing that these fundamental beliefs are all products of passions and instincts. In a way analogous to that in which Kant goes behind mental experience to its underlying *a priori* categories of understanding, Hume takes mental experience to be conditioned by the original instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature.¹⁶ Building on the immediately available contents of the mind and a structured set of original qualities of human nature conditioning this mental experience, Hume attempts to construct an account to explain all important human phenomena.

However, Hume's naturalist philosophy is not reductionist. It does not take everything all the way down to original psychological and biological facts. Instead, his thinking immediately leads to the social and historical dimension of human life. Hume places tremendous emphasis on the distinction between nature and artifice throughout his philosophy. The set of original propensities of human nature with which he starts are far from sufficient to account for the complexity of human phenomena. And according to Hume, there is no substantial and constructive human rationality that would be able to bridge the gap. Given this situation, he appeals to social and historical process to address the complexity. Much of his work is to explain how our original feelings and instincts operate together within a social context and through a historical process: they get extended, mixed, transformed, and developed, resulting in various complicated human

¹⁶ In the last few decades, there has been an attempt to explore Hume's difference from empiricism and the parallel between some aspects of his philosophical thinking and Kant's project. For a few examples, see Robert Paul Wolff, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity" *The Philosophical Review* 69, no.3 (July 1960): 289–310; Lewis White Beck, *Essays on Kant and Hume* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Henry Allison, *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

phenomena. In this sense Hume's naturalistic project almost inevitably develops into a social and historical account. This social and historical dimension is not added to his naturalistic account, but is an integral part of it. Indeed, it can even be argued that for Hume the feature that distinguishes humans from animals is not rationality or any other human faculty, but human sociality. Compared with many other accounts of his time, Hume's man is far less a self-determining rational subject, and much more a social being influenced by numerous social and historical causes.¹⁷

In such an account of human nature and human life, passions of various sorts are ascribed much more importance than in most other philosophies. By Hume's account, reason is reduced to inference (either deductively inferred or inductively inferred), and its application is confined either to comparing ideas or to inferring matters of fact. According to his theory of action, reason is essentially inept, and only passion can motivate action. According to his meta-ethics, moral distinction of right and wrong derives from sentiments rather than from reason. Hume's understanding of virtues takes on a special significance: virtue ethics is an ethical approach that is grounded in the facts of human desires and passion and greatly downplays the role of practical reasoning. This is very different from, for instance, Aristotle's virtue theory.¹⁸ Returning to our issue of the problem of motivation in a liberal society, the typical liberal answer to this question, as we have seen above, is either prudential calculation or voluntary commitment, which

¹⁷ See James Moore, "The Social Background of Hume's Science of Human Nature," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi and Wade L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 23–42.

¹⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163–201.

presupposes the existence of autonomous rational agency. Hume's understanding of human nature in general, and his theory of motivation in particular offers us an alternative perspective.

Secondly, I wish to indicate how directly Hume's theory of virtues is related to liberal rules and institutions, which will be done with reference to his division between natural virtues and artificial virtues.

Proceeding from his naturalistic understanding of human nature, Hume famously divides virtues into two groups: natural virtues and artificial virtues. Natural virtues all have roots in the passions human nature can originally possess, including other-regarding virtues such as benevolence, compassion, generosity, friendship, gratitude, etc.; self-regarding virtues like greatness of soul, temperance, industry, cheerfulness, and fortitude, etc.; and natural abilities like judgment and imagination. By contrast, artificial virtues are not original to human nature, but have to come about through human creation. This group involves justice, honesty, fidelity, allegiance, civility, etc., which are all related to the fundamental institutions and practices in society.¹⁹

There is much to be said about this division, but I will emphasize just one point here. These two groups of virtues operate on different levels of human life. The activities concerning natural virtues stay on the personal and local level, whereas artificial virtues refer to action associate with formal institutions and practices. Or, put another way, while natural virtues are either self-regarding or concern our dealings with intimates and acquaintances, the emphasis of artificial virtues is on relations among non-intimates and

¹⁹ Although Hume deals with the issue of civility or politeness in the discussion of natural virtues (see T 3.3.2), he makes it clear that politeness or civility is artificial virtue. Also see Mikko Tolonen, "Politeness, Paris and the *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 34, no.1 (2008): 21–42.

strangers. In Hume's own words, these are "two different sorts of commerce, the interested and the disinterested." He observes that interested commerce relating to artificial virtues "begins to take place, and to predominate in society" as society becomes civilized (T 3.2.5.10; SBN 521).

By Hume's account, natural passions are characteristically narrow and primarily concern only their possessors and the people close to them: relatives, friends, neighbors and colleagues. Accordingly, natural virtues are also characterized by this narrowness. Benevolence, for instance, is limited in its range of application, and gradually diminishes as the range increases. This feature makes natural virtues typically fit with local and intimate relations.

By contrast, artificial virtues are clearly concerned with the relationship between non-intimates and strangers. They all concern the fundamental institutions and practices in a society, and they are all related to general rules, which equally apply to all members across society, without taking into consideration any personal features. Actually, Hume sometimes uses the word "justice" to refer to the whole group of virtues.²⁰ These virtues are not self-sufficiently independent traits that can operate in many different contexts, but are strictly context-dependent. Every virtue is embedded in a specific institution or social practice: justice is a constitutive component of the system of property, fidelity of the practice of promise, allegiance of the political system, etc.

²⁰ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Why Hume's 'General Point of View' Isn't Ideal---And Shouldn't Be," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11, no.1 (1994): 202–28; Jacqueline Taylor, "Justice and the Foundations of Social Morality in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 24, no.1 (April 1998): 5–30.

Moreover, the institutions and practices involved here are not just the rules of property in general or government in general. They are intended by Hume to represent the defining features of institutions in a liberal society. Private property, the practice of contracting, the government as the enactor of the rule of law, and civility as concerns everyday interaction among strangers, are all central parts of the liberal society as modern classical liberalism understands it.²¹ So it is not far-fetched to say that except for the sexual virtue of modesty, Hume's artificial virtues are all liberal virtues in the sense of being constitutive of liberal institutions and practices. Since our topic is the agent's motivation for cooperating with liberal institutions, these artificial virtues will be the primary object of our study.

However, this does not mean that natural virtues are irrelevant to our discussion. Natural virtues, as Hume defines them, are not directly associated with formal institutions and practices. But as I will explain in the fifth chapter, they are important supports for the cultivation of the artificial virtues. Industry, enterprise, temperance, and assiduity, for instance, can greatly strengthen the motive to comply with the rules of justice: they are all constitutive of the paradigmatic personality in a liberal society.

This brings us to the last point I wish to indicate here: that Hume's account of artificial virtues is deliberately focused on their functioning as *motivating dispositions* in sustaining social and political institutions. A brief review of how Hume starts his account of artificial virtues in the *Treatise* will reveal how this is the case.

²¹ Hume's understanding of liberal institutions is expressed much more clearly in his many essays and his *History of England*. In all relevant discussions in these writings, his attention is almost always focused on the significance of private property and the rule of law.

Hume understands virtue primarily in terms of the relation between motive and action. To be more specific, in his view, a virtue is characterized as a disposition that motivates action which tends to be useful or agreeable to its possessor or those having commerce with the possessor. This understanding of virtue is essentially functional, and is quite different from that of traditional virtue theory. According to Aristotle, the paradigmatic traditional virtue theorist, virtue is the excellence manifested in the way certain characteristic human activities are performed. Considered this way, virtuous action is not so much an effect caused by a motive as a manifestation embodying a character trait. The relation between a virtue and its action is not that of cause and effect but that of the whole and its constitutive part. This difference is certainly closely connected with the intellectual shift in modern time from the aspiration to the highest perfection of humanity to the pursuit of peace and comfortable life. The difference may not be sharp and fast in all cases, and there are also certainly similarities, but the shift of emphasis is beyond doubt.

For Hume, to explain a virtue is first and foremost to explain what is its motivational state. Within the context of Hume's naturalist philosophy, what constitutes the motivational state of natural virtues is evident. Every natural virtue has its corresponding natural passion which men typically tend to have. These natural passions like parental love or compassion toward people in distress, if operating properly, will come to be natural virtues that motivate relevant virtuous action. While this conception of natural virtues might be a little simplistic in itself, the distinction between nature and artifice does help sharpen Hume's awareness to the historical character of another class of virtues like justice, promise, and allegiance. It is precisely in light of this distinction

that Hume repeatedly claims that these virtues are “naturally unintelligible.” What is the psychological state of these virtues? What exactly is their motivational state? These are questions on which Hume’s account of artificial virtues focuses.

He supposes a situation where a person has borrowed a sum of money from someone else and it is time for him to pay the loan back. Then Hume forces us to face an unusual question, “What reason or motive have I to restore the money?” Our response would very probably be that one will return the money because he is disposed to perform just acts. This presumed unhistorical reaction is exactly what Hume targets. The motive cannot be the regard to justice, since men could have this virtue only through a process of socialization. For a man not yet civilized in the society, this answer would be “perfectly unintelligible.” He must ask, “Wherein consists this honesty and justice, which you find in restoring a loan, and abstaining from the property of others?” This leads him to the claim that “’Tis requisite, then, to find some motive to acts of justice and honesty, distinct from our regard to the honesty; and in this lies the great difficulty” (T 3.2.1.9; SBN 480).

Three salient options come to the mind, yet Hume dismisses them one after another. Self-love is more like the source of injustice, private benevolence is too narrow and prejudicial, and the regard to public interest is too sublime to affect the generality of mankind. None of these presumably natural passions can move people to constant compliance.

More important to our purpose, Hume pays special attention to the reflective awareness of the moral merit of just acts, “the regard to the merit of action” or “the sense of duty,” as he calls it. He repeatedly stresses the difference between genuine virtuous disposition and this reflective awareness. First of all, Hume’s virtue theory asserts that

virtuous action, if taken merely as external performance, has no moral merit, since it could be produced by accident or proceed from external pressure. In order for action to take on moral significance, it has to arise from some stable and enduring part of human nature, that is, from a character trait or virtue. So the reflective awareness of the merit of action comes only after the virtuous motive has been present and given merit to its external performance. Secondly, Hume does not deny that under some circumstances the awareness could play a motivational role in place of a virtuous disposition, but this seems hardly a desirable situation. According to Hume, a typical situation in which an agent has to depend on his sense of duty as the motive of compliance is one in which he does not possess a virtue that is part of the common morality of society. This agent reflectively knows about the requirement of the virtue, but does not feel it in his heart. Either because he wants to look morally good or because he wants to acquire the related virtue by practice, he can perform the required action in accordance with that sense of duty. For Hume, this motive cannot be constant and stable. This distinction between virtue and the reflective awareness of it further shows how focused Hume's account is on the motivational state of virtue.

Thus Hume claims that the motivational state of just virtues comes only from artifice and contrivance: "We must allow, that the sense of justice and injustice is not deriv'd from nature, but arises artificially, tho' necessarily from education, and human convention" (T 3.2.1.17; SBN 483). This conclusion leads him to give an account of the historical origin of justice. In this account convention occupies a central position. From one point of view, the just rules and institutions arise through convention; from another

point of view, the virtue of justice develops through convention as well. Moral and political theory comes to be different dimension of the same account.

We can now have a general idea how Hume's theory of virtue is inextricably intertwined with his political theory. The virtues of justice, honesty, fidelity, and political allegiance arise and prosper only within the context of their related institutions, and, conversely, they are indispensable in moving people to sustain these institutions. Because of this context-specific nature, Hume's artificial virtues do not reduce to a general virtue of law-abidingness, a general Kantian disposition to act in accordance with moral principles, or a general desire to do one's duty. They are more diverse and specific and match their relevant institutions.

Hume and Interest-Based Liberalism

Hume's view on the relation between liberty and virtue has received little attention in the secondary literature. By contrast, the conception of self-interest features conspicuously in the standard interpretation of Hume's political theory. Considered within the context of the liberal tradition, Hume is widely regarded as a prominent example of interest-based liberalism, as distinct from, for example, Lockean, rights-based liberalism or Kantian, autonomy-based liberalism.

Hume's notion of liberty, as it concerns social and political life, is negative liberty as defined by Isaiah Berlin.²² He stresses the significance of "distinguishing betwixt the

²² Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

liberty of *spontaneity*...and the liberty of *indifference*; betwixt that which is oppos'd to violence, and that which means a negation of necessity and causes" (T 2.3.2.1; SBN 407; original emphasis). The latter is the philosophical notion of liberty or free will, which Hume firmly repudiates; whereas the former is the liberty in the sense of being free from external interference or constraint, which "is universally allowed to belong to every one who is not a prisoner and in chains" (EHU 8.23; SBN 95).

However, Hume does not feel that the state of negative liberty is of great value independent of any social context. Hobbes, Locke, and in another way, Rousseau, all justify liberty by appealing to the conception of the state of nature. For them, liberty is first and foremost a primitive fact, natural liberty, which constitutes the source or standard for all sorts of liberty in social and political condition. By contrast, Hume refuses to understand liberty as natural right or natural capacity. For him, liberty is not to be understood as natural endowment which can be automatically possessed outside of social context. Rather, liberty is more like the attribute of social order than the capacity of the individual. He draws a sharp line between "pretended liberty" under barbarous condition and "genuine liberty" under civilized condition. Genuine liberty can appear only in the civilized society, with a stable property order, the "general protection of law," and limited government. Therefore the civilized order, by Hume's account, is essentially the liberal order. To speak of the evolution and establishment of the civilized order is to speak of the evolution and establishment of liberty.²³

²³ Donald W. Livingston, "Hume's Historical Conception of Liberty," in *Liberty in Hume's History of England*, ed. Nicholas Capaldi and Donald W. Livingston (Dordrecht, Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1990), 105–54.

Roughly speaking, self-interest obviously occupies an important place in Hume's account of the civilized order. For him, the central aspects of the civilized order are the conventions concerning property, exchange, and promise. All these conventions are based on the considerations of advantage. In Hume's political and historical writings, the account of the conventions of justice is connected with an account of commercial society and an analysis of political economy, giving further prominence to the idea of self-interest. Thus interest, the civilized order, and liberty are inherently connected with each other in Hume's theory. In contrast with the rationalistic and voluntaristic arguments of social contract theory, Hume's interest-based liberalism is presented as a sociological and historical account.²⁴ Seen this way, it seems perfectly appropriate to characterize Hume's political theory as an interest-based liberalism.

Following this characterization of Hume's political thought, political theorists usually hold that Hume takes self-interest as the dominant motive. On the other hand, moral theorists largely concede this point. They focus their attention on Hume's sentimental theory of moral judgment rather than the idea of virtue as motivating disposition.

Hume's theory of justice and government, especially his account of the growth of institutions, has been the focus of the study of his political thought. His sharp sensitivity to the logic of human interaction has impressed many commentators. But with this wide appreciation comes also the simplification of Hume's account of motivation into the conception of self-interest. A typical example is Hayek. He was among the earliest in the

²⁴ F.A.Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1–32.

twentieth century who greatly admire Hume. Hayek maintains that the idea of the unintended growth of institutions and practices is at the heart of liberal thought.²⁵

Naturally Hume figures very prominently in Hayek's account of liberalism:

Hume gives us probably the only comprehensive statement of the legal and political philosophy which later became known as liberalism. It is today fairly generally recognized that the program of 19th-century liberalism contained two distinct and in some ways even antagonistic elements, liberalism proper and the democratic tradition. ...the liberal ideal of personal liberty was first formulated in England. ... And it is in Hume and not, as is commonly believed, in Locke ...that we find the fullest statement of these doctrines.²⁶

Hayek stresses the significance of Hume's account of historical evolution of rules of justice. However, when it comes to the issue of motive, he writes, "Hume takes great pains to show for each of these rules how self-interest will lead to their being increasingly observed and finally enforced."²⁷

This simplistic reading produces another interesting misunderstanding in Hayek. Hume brings out certain weaknesses of human nature to show how it is difficult for people to adhere to rules, but Hayek reverses the direction of this reasoning, claiming that these weaknesses of human nature entail the necessity of binding people by general and inflexible rules. Obviously, one reason for this misreading is that for Hayek the motivation of compliance poses no serious problem.²⁸

²⁵ F. A. Hayek, "Freedom, Reason, and Tradition," *Ethics* 68, no. 4 (July 1958): 229–45.

²⁶ Hayek, "Legal and Political Philosophy," 340.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 346–47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

One strong trend in the study of Hume's political theory is the game-theoretical interpretation. Starting from David Lewis's influential work: *Convention: A Philosophical Study*,²⁹ Hume's account of justice and government is increasingly thought to be original in explaining the formation of convention in terms of strategic coordination. In today's various introductions to the application of game theory to social and political analysis, Hume is often mentioned as a pioneer. This attributes great significance to his political theory, but it also reinforces the view that Hume conceives of self-interest as the dominant motive for rule-following. In his book in 2007, Russell Hardin presents the until now most systematic case for interpreting Hume in this manner.³⁰ He also goes the furthest in simplifying Hume's view of motivation. He not only argues for the dominance of the motive of self-interest in Hume, but he also explicitly denies the importance of virtue theory in Hume's thought. According to him, Hume not only thinks that social and political institutions result from game-theoretical interaction, but also understands moral phenomena as small-scale strategic interaction which is to be explained in terms of rational choice on the basis of self-interest. Virtue ethics is just the vocabulary of Hume's moral thought, not its substance.³¹ Related to this game-theoretical reading is the

²⁹ Lewis claims that his analysis of convention "is a theory along the lines of Hume's, in his discussion of the origin of justice and property." David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3.

³⁰ Hardin writes, "[T]he argument is that his [Hume] categories are very consistently ordered as though they were derived or described game theoretically. This is true of his general discussions and also of his examples or accounts of specific problems in the world. To be so consistent required a sophistication and clear-headedness that is beyond most of us and that has been beyond many commentators on Hume." Hardin, *Moral and Political Theorist*, 59.

³¹ Hardin claims, "Hume puts his claims in the vocabulary of virtue theory. He does so because that was the going theory and vocabulary of his time." Hardin, *Moral and Political Theorist*, 20.

contractarian reading of Hume, argued by scholars such as David Gauthier and Jean Hampton.³² This reading is directly relevant to our topic, and I will discuss it in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that this reading presupposes the centrality of self-interest in Hume's theory.

In the area of moral theory, Hume's complex treatment of the motivation for compliance is also largely overlooked. Hume's moral thought involves both a sentimental theory of moral judgment and a virtue theory. The former deals with the question "where is the moral distinction derived from?" This concern falls into the area of meta-ethics, the central branch of contemporary moral philosophy. Not surprisingly, this theory of moral sentiment has come to be the focus of the study of his moral thought.

A major feature of this theory is that it is spectator-centered rather than agent-centered. Arguing against the rationalist ethics of Clarke and Wollaston, Hume denies that reason is the source of morality and holds that moral distinction arises from certain human sentiments in response to the effects of character traits. He argues that to ensure the impartiality of these reactive moral sentiments, the qualified moral sentiment must proceed from the perspective of a spectator who observes or contemplates from a general point of view. While there is already a difference of emphasis between moral judgment and moral motivation, this model of spectator-centered moral judgment further widens the discrepancy.

³² David Gauthier, "David Hume, Contractarian," *The Philosophical Review* 88, no.1 (April 1979): 3–38; Jean Hampton, "Two Faces of Contractarian Thought," in *Contractarian and Rational Choice: Essays on David Gauthier's Morals by Agreement*, ed. Peter Vallentyne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31–55; also see Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Thus commentators in moral theory are often contented with a two-fold interpretation: for Hume moral judgment is driven by a disinterested concern, but the dominant motive to conform to rules is self-interest. Annette Baier expresses a common view when she says:

Each person's motive, in observing the rules of justice, can be enlightened self-interest, awareness of her own share in the public interest, but when it comes to approving such motivated acts, her own and others', it is the public interest as such that becomes the relevant concern, not just any one person's share in it.³³

Similarly, Penelhum remarks, "such conventions often entail inconvenience for us, but we sustain them through self-interest. Once they are established, it is easy to understand how they acquire the extra status given them through the operations of approval and disapproval."³⁴ Michael Gill writes, "Hume's constructive account of the development of society and the artifice of justice is also basically Mandevillian in that it, too, is grounded almost entirely in self-interest."³⁵

Although Hume's account of justice has stimulated many comments, his virtue theory per se has received very little attention, and studies directly addressing the role of Hume's virtues in a liberal society are even fewer. This situation has begun to change in the last two decades, and Hume's account of virtues, especially his account of the virtue of justice, received more attention than before,. However, as far as the general

³³ Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 242.

³⁴ Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed. ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 259.

³⁵ Michael Gill, "Hume's Progressive View of Human Nature," *Hume Studies* 26, no.1 (April 2000): 87–108.

characterization of Hume's political theory is concerned, the motive of self-interest is still emphasized as central to Hume's liberalism.

The motive of self-interest is often taken to be self-evident. But its actual meaning can be ambiguous and complicated. In Hume studies, although researchers touch the issue of Hume's use of this conception very often, the treatment tends to be piecemeal and tangential. To understand the motivational role of virtues, we must inquire into Hume's understanding of self-interest. It is only in terms of the relation between self-interest and virtues that the significance of virtues as motive can be explained.

Furthermore, the examination of the issue of self-interest will bring us to another doctrine concerning the motivation of compliance, which centers around the ideas of willing, consent and promise.

So our discussion will deal with three sources of motivation: will, self-interest, and virtuous disposition. It is in terms of Hume's critical assessment of the former two motivations that the significance of virtuous motivation can be understood.

The Will, Calculating Interest, and Virtuous Dispositions

As the notion of the supernatural order gradually lost its grip on the imagination of people, moral requirements and the individual's well-being began to be felt to be distinct and separate from each other. How do the authorities make sure that people constantly and enduringly comply with moral demands? What motivates people to stick with rules even if doing so would put them at a disadvantage? Arising from the modern natural law tradition in the seventeenth century, voluntarism became the dominant

solution to the problem. It is the acts of will of individuals that construct the political order and commit them to it. The human will is conceived of as a particular sort of moral cause which is capable of producing duties and binding people to their performance.

At the same time, corresponding to the lowering of political goals, the concept of interests also appeared on the scene. Different from the passion of self-love or selfishness, self-interest was understood to involve rational calculation. As the desires were increasingly connected to safety and material prosperity, it became possible to present rational self-interest as a stable and prudent motive, which could overcome politically pernicious passions. More importantly, the long-term interests seemed to be able to bridge the gap between morality and the individual's well-being, making it easier for people to obey the rules. If one also believed in the natural harmony of the interests of individuals and the interests of society, the problem of motivation would have a perfect solution.

These two solutions focused on volition and reason respectively, but there are other dimensions of human nature which could also be taken as the central source of moral motive. The sentimentalist theory of morality, which was initiated by Shaftesbury and developed by Hutcheson in the early eighteenth century, was a representative attempt to find a moral source in certain natural passions and sentiments. In particular, in contrast to the Hobbesian picture of the dominance of self-love, sentimentalism stressed the natural presence of benevolence in human nature, taking it to be the driving force behind moral actions. On this view, morality is essentially equated with other-regarding motives. In contrast to the above-mentioned attempts to rest morality on volition or calculation,

this third approach grounds morality in human passionate dispositions and tries to apply the conception of virtue accordingly.

When Hume engaged the debate in the mid eighteenth century, various theories of will were influential, interest theory was on the rise, and sentimentalism began to draw attention. Insofar as the problem of motivation was concerned, these theories presented three major options for him. It is only by reference to his treatment of voluntarism and interest theory that it is possible to explain why virtue plays a large role in his thought and how it operates to motivate rule following behavior.

From Hume's point of view, voluntarism had to be rejected simply because it was "naturally unintelligible." Although arising as an effort to shift the foundation of polity from divine command to human nature, the modern natural law movement had deep roots in theology. For instance, Grotius took the view that human institutions came into being by virtue of the acts of will of the people, but this free will derived its justificatory source from the natural law. On the other hand, Hobbes, Locke and Pufendorf were all more or less under the spell of theological nominalism. It was in the context of theological voluntarism that the human will could be understood as a particular moral cause. The later secularized understanding of the human will was also inseparable from a metaphysical outlook. Kant's later concept of will as the human rational capacity to act in accordance with moral principles was itself a strongly metaphysical notion, and still under the shadow of the divine will.³⁶ In Hume's view, this kind of voluntarism is an example of what he calls "false philosophy," which is derived from human delusion and

³⁶ See G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no.124 (January 1958): 1–16.

cannot make sense to a truly philosophical mind.³⁷ Hume stripped the human will of its metaphysical character and explained it as a natural phenomenon. In explaining the set of artificial institutions on which he focused, he left no doubt that promise or consent was not an independent source of compliance.

Hume's rejection of voluntarism was directly related to his treatment of interest theory. As he repeatedly asserts, interest is first and foremost taken as the very substitute for promise in explaining the origin of justice and government. In light of his naturalist philosophy, Hume explains various institutions in terms of the interest they serve to satisfy. He views "the regard to interest" as a natural motivating force for the performance of duties required by liberal institutions. This line of thought was an important part of his account of convention and made him an important contributor to the making of interest-based liberalism.

However, Hume's treatment of the motive of rational self-interest is far more complicated. According to him, passion alone can motivate actions, whereas reason is restricted to inference and does not have any normative role to play. Influenced by the Epicurean understanding of passion, Hume sees even the passion of interest as being violent and destructive. The impotence of reason and the violence of passion make it difficult for Hume to imagine the natural dominance in human nature of the motive of enlightened self-interest. Therefore, although talk of interest seems to pervade his writings, self-interested calculation serves as a motive only in the initial creation of conventions. Beyond that, its role as motive becomes fundamentally obscure. Hume

³⁷ Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

stresses that human beings' reasoning ability is limited and that, in addition, the human "incurable infirmity" to prefer immediate satisfaction to long-term benefit makes prudence unreliable.

The difficulty for Hume is to find a motive which will work constantly and enduringly to ensure compliance. According to the theory of interest, the motive of rational self-interest is a natural phenomenon. However, this supposedly natural motive turns out to be quite unnatural. The central element of this motive is rational calculation. The problem with this element does not lie in the requirement of calculation: a moderate reasoning ability will normally be adequate. The difficulty is rather that it presupposes both continued awareness of one's long-term interests and reflective self-control in adherence to these long-term interests. To solve this problem, Hume puts unreflective dispositions in place of reflective interest. He argues that the traditionally conceived struggle between reason and passion is actually the opposition between calm passions and violent passions. For him, this group of calm passions is comprised of fixed unreflective tendencies to act in our long-term interests, and they may take over the role assigned to the motive of self-interest. However, calm passions do not necessarily prevail over violent passions. It takes much effort to make them the settled principles of mind, and that state of mind is actually a virtuous one, namely strength of mind.

Moreover, the problem with interest theory goes beyond the difficulty of being constantly prudent. Even if the motive of rational self-interest could be naturally dominant in the human mind, and even if everybody could reliably be motivated to seek his prudent interest, there are occasions when certain long-term interests of the individual may conflict with the long-term interests he shares with all other members of society. A

fundamental fact that Hume stresses is that the benefit of the rules of justice can be realized only when the rules are generally observed, whereas any particular performance of just acts will not necessarily be beneficial to the agent. Under such circumstances, Hume's famous "sensible knave" will make exceptions to rules whenever he can get away with it and win extra benefits. Hume importantly admits that there are simply no rational arguments powerful enough to establish beyond doubt the irrationality of the sensible knave. Therefore to ensure stable compliance, people must learn to be indifferent to a degree to the specific result of every separate act of justice. In other words, they must acquire certain unreflective dispositions to comply with rules. Virtuous motive is the eventual solution to the problem.

Hume's account of virtues draws greatly from the sentimentalist theory of morality, particularly from Hutcheson. Both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson hold that morality essentially consists of inner motives, and the merit of actions can only come from their virtuous motives. Hume continues this line of thought. Hutcheson thinks that moral distinction is derived from the specific feeling of approval and disapproval upon the contemplation of character traits, and so does Hume. However, Hume drastically breaks with any teleological or providential outlook and explains virtues entirely in terms of empirical experience and social interaction. Hume actually puts in place a new foundation for virtues, his "science of man." His account of virtues presupposes his theory of moral necessity and theory of the passions.

Along with this fundamental shift in the foundation of virtue, Hume's understanding of the nature and origin of virtues also takes a different direction. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson are both deeply involved in the debate about the naturalness

of selfishness or altruism. In opposition to Hobbesian egoism, they equate virtues with other-regarding motives and argue that these other-regarding motives are natural to the human mind. By contrast, Hume holds that it is impossible to “reduce all the various emotions of the human mind to a perfect simplicity. The case is not the same in this species of philosophy as in physics” (EPM app.2.7; SBN 299). For him, neither selfishness nor benevolence is a single virtue: both of them are collective names for a variety of character traits. So he talks about “avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions vulgarly, though improperly, comprised under the denomination of self-love” (EPM 9.5; SBN 271), and places under the category of “benevolence” virtues such as being “sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent” (EPM 2.1; SBN 176). More importantly, he claims that man’s natural other-regarding feelings are essentially partial in nature and limited in the range of application. Insofar as impartial treatment of strangers is concerned, we have to extend our natural sentiments beyond their original bounds and artificially produce a new group of virtues, which Hume calls as “artificial virtues” and puts under the category “justice.” As we have seen, most of these virtues are directly related to liberal institutions.

Although understanding just virtues as artificial virtues, Hume greatly downplays the role of deliberate cultivation in shaping them. In light of his skepticism about the practical use of reason, both the shaping and the operation of virtues are quite involuntary for Hume. They are essentially a habituation process, and the process is essentially unreflective. Just virtues are all context-specific. People are engaged in certain practices and acquire corresponding dispositions by practice. The resulting virtuous dispositions are largely blind habits. I will claim that the opposition between reflective self-interest

and unreflective virtuous tendency is the key to understanding Hume's treatment of the problem of motivation in a liberal order. This opposition is at the heart of his dealing with the concept of rational self-interest, and it is also intimately connected to his transformation of virtue theory on the basis of his "science of man."

To sum up, Hume's thinking about the relation of liberty and virtue proceeds in the context of his explanation of the establishment and maintenance of liberal order. This fact implies that for Hume the problem of the significance of virtues for the liberal order directly bears upon the problem of motivation in liberalism and that his treatment of the issue is understandable only in connection with and by contrast to his understanding of the roles of voluntarism and interest theory. Eventually he locates the central motivation of compliance in human dispositions of character. By doing so, he claims that virtues are deeply involved in the constitution of liberal order.

Chapter Two

Hume's Critique of Social Contract Theory

Hume is well known for his trenchant critique of social contract theory. Some commentators even thought that his critique had decisively demolished that tradition. Social contract theory died out in the nineteenth century, but there has been a revival of interest in it in the last few decades. The surprising thing is that some representative scholars in this rebirth of contractarianism claim that Hume's political thought is by nature contractarian.¹ In some cases, it is even argued that Hume's way of explaining justice and government brings out what is true in Hobbes's contractarianism, or put another way, Hobbes's contractarianism, if revised and developed in the right direction, would end up being a Humean account.²

Questions naturally arise: what on earth is the nature of Hume's critique of social contract theory? How could his theory be still characterized as contractarian after its significant break with social contract theory? These questions are not only important in themselves, but directly relevant to our topic. Hume's treatment of the problem of motivation involves his dealings with voluntarism and interest theory. There is no doubt that Hume completely rejects the doctrine of promise as presented in classical contractarianism. If after this rejection, his theory still seems somehow connected with contractarianism, the connection must lie in the particular use he makes of the conception

¹ Gauthier, "David Hume, Contractarian."

² Hampton, "Two Faces."

of self-interest, which he substitutes for promise as the true foundation of government. Here we will have a good chance to observe how Hume understands the interest theory and how that understanding brings him to virtue and habit as direct motives for allegiance.

The discussion will emphasize three points. First, classical social contract theory typically involves two strains of thought, a prudential account and a voluntarist account. Hume's critique of social contract theory is essentially focused on its voluntarist aspect. He not only denies the historical plausibility of the idea of consent as the ground for political allegiance, but undermines the binding force of the duty of promise-keeping by cutting off its link with the metaphysical and theological outlook.

Second, in place of promise, Hume puts human interest as the genuine foundation for civil authority and allegiance. Hume's replacing promise with interest was a typical case of the intellectual transition from a metaphysical and theological outlook to a naturalist and rationalist point of view that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Third, Hume maintains that self-interest is the only justifying reason for civil authority and political duty. But he does not feel that reflective self-interest can operate well as the direct motivation for the formation and maintenance of allegiance. Being aware of this discrepancy between ultimate reason and immediate motive, he presents the establishment of government and allegiance largely as unintended consequences of a long historical evolution. Seen in this light, allegiance is largely a habitual disposition rather than a reflectively chosen attitude.

Two Strains of Thought in Social Contract Theory

Classical social contract theory, as developed by the modern natural law thinkers, has many different versions. But one significant feature common to all versions is that it typically involves two strains of thought: a rationalist account and a voluntarist account. The rationalist account is in fact a prudential reasoning. It describes the pre-political human predicament, attaching importance to self-preservation and highlighting difficulties of surviving and prospering in that situation. Given these circumstances it will seem reasonable and necessary for people to set up government and enter into political society. On the other hand, the voluntarist account typically features willing, consent, and promise. People are by nature free and equal, and therefore nobody has authority to govern others without their consent. Political power is legitimate only when it is freely endorsed by the individuals living under it.³

The relationship between the two strains of thought seems largely ignored in the secondary literature on contract theory. Some commentators focus on the rationalist strand of contract theory, stressing that it develops a naturalistic account of political society. Others give prominence to the voluntarist strand, taking the central ideas of modern political thought to be the will and autonomy.⁴ These two strains of thought coexist in contract theory, but there seems to be a potential tension between them. The

³ A. John Simmons, "Justification and Legitimacy," *Ethics* 109, no.4 (July 1999): 739–71.

⁴ For example, J. W. Gough stresses the voluntarist elements of contract in *The Social Contract*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), whereas Ernst Cassirer stresses the rationalist elements in *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946).

rationalist strain claims that entrance into political society is the necessary conclusion derived from interest calculation, whereas the voluntarist strain argues that political authority is the outcome of autonomous choice. If the necessity for government was as compelling as the rationalist account claims, the refusal to give consent would be unreasonable. Yet if no real alternative was available, it would be hard to conceive of this consent as a genuine exercise of freedom.

However, the tension could arise primarily because we take the two strains out of their historical context, and compare and contrast them in an abstract way. If we have a larger picture in mind, the situation will look different. The complex relationship between reason and will can be traced back to the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian theology. At least since the conception of the will appeared in the early Christian history, the relation between reason and will has become a significant topic in the history of Western thought. Neither intellect without the freedom of will nor the will unguided by reason is easily conceivable. A positive relationship has to be formed between them. The struggle with this problem in medieval theology was not merely confined to the analysis of human nature, but extended to the understanding of the divine nature, culminating in theological nominalism, which was deeply involved in the constitution of modern contractarianism.⁵

Within the context of modern social contract theory, however, the relationship between reason and will has taken on a special meaning. During the early modern period, the inherited ideas about nature and God either faced serious challenge or underwent

⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1983), especially pt. 2.

great transformation. The emergence of social contract theory was closely connected with a peculiar moment in this intellectual transition from a teleological and theological outlook to a naturalist and rationalist worldview. At that moment, the naturalness of the state had come to be undermined, whereas the larger scheme of things was still understood in the light of natural law doctrine or theological voluntarism. Political institutions fell into the category of human creation, yet the human will continued to be subjected to the divine command. Put in this perspective, social contract theory can be understood to serve two functions: on the one hand, it had to explain how government came into existence by human artifice; on the other hand, it was supposed to lay a foundation for political society through the connection between the human will and the natural and divine order. It might not be far-fetched to say that the two strains of thought in contractarianism undertake the two tasks respectively.⁶ Under the pressure of this underlying logic, the modern natural law thinkers increasingly tended to develop historical accounts to explain legal and political institutions, while “consent” increasingly became the only link between positive laws and the divine order.⁷ This feature is clearly captured by Grotius:

[S]ince it is a rule of the law of nature to abide by pacts, out of this source the bodies of municipal law have arisen. ...The mother of municipal law is that obligation which arises from mutual consent; and since this obligation derives its

⁶ Will Kymlicka, “The Social Contract Tradition,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 186–96.

⁷ Pauline C. Westerman, “Hume and the Natural Lawyers: A Change of Landscapes,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart & John P. Wright (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 83–104.

orce from the law of nature, nature may be considered, so to say, the great-grandmother of municipal law.⁸

This coexistence of the rationalist and voluntarist strains is best reflected in the two-fold meaning of the conception of the will in modern contract theory. On the one hand, there is the conception of the will as a component of an empirical understanding of human psychology. The will understood along this empiricist line is situated in the causal sequence of the human mind. On the other hand, there is the metaphysical conception of the will within the voluntarist line of thought. This will is something like a self-causality, transcending empirical constraints and constituting the human moral capacity for self-determination.⁹

Hobbes is a paradigmatic example in this respect. He rigorously develops a materialistic psychology which integrates humans into a mechanic universe. Humans are causally driven by desire and passion. Reason is nothing more than instrumental calculation, which cannot operate at odds with impulse and passion. On such a theory, deliberation is reduced to the interplay of appetites and impulses, and the human end is determined by whatever one happens to desire most intensely at a given moment. The will is merely the last appetite of this so-called deliberation process. On the other hand, however, Hobbes leans heavily toward a deontological language when it comes to the obligation to obey the sovereign. His discussion centers on voluntarist and juridical conceptions such as natural right, promise, covenant and obligation, which presuppose a

⁸ Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis*, Prolegomena, pars 15–16; I quoted this passage from Westerman, *Hume and Natural Lawyers*, 89–90.

⁹ Patrick Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), introduction.

metaphysical notion of will. Some commentators argue that there is a deep discontinuity between Hobbes's psychology of man and his moral and political theory. A few even claim that Hobbes mounted a full-blown deontological moral theory.¹⁰ While these views could be a little exaggerated, what cannot be denied is that "there is no consistent argument for absolute sovereignty based on self-interest in *Leviathan*."¹¹

The deontological aspect of Hobbes's thought has been a hot topic among Hobbes scholars, and his relation to theological nominalism may be a more controversial issue. Considering his remarkable posture toward a naturalistic understanding of man and the world, Hobbes's arguable connection with the conceptions of autonomous agency and divine command seems very revealing as to the underlying logic of modern social contract theory. Hobbes does not have a coherent account of the will to underlie the two lines of thought, yet it seems obvious that he needs to use the conception of the will in both ways. On the one hand, Hobbes seeks to show that the need for establishing a sovereign is so compelling that no reasonable man will resist this conclusion. On the other hand, the decision to engage in this project must come out of voluntary consent in order to be morally and metaphysically binding. A valid commitment cannot be a mechanical effect of physical or psychological causes. Rather, it has to be a voluntary act of free will that transcends natural causality.¹²

¹⁰ For an early representative defense of this view, see A. E. Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes" (1938), in *Hobbes Studies*, ed. Keith C. Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 35–55; for the best known book-length development of this view, see Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

¹¹ Hampton, "Two Faces," 57.

¹² Patrick Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy*, chap.1.

One might think that the difference between the rationalist and voluntarist accounts can be equated with the difference between explanation and justification. However, the rationalist strain explains the human condition in terms of causal necessity and demonstrates why it is compelling to have a government. This reasoning can certainly serve a justificatory function for government and allegiance. It is just that this justification is in nature prudential rather than moral, since it is based on the satisfaction of a long-term interest. On the other hand, the voluntarist strain gives centrality to voluntary commitment, thus producing another type of justification for the state. The latter justification does not focus on the usefulness of the government: its point is rather to confer moral legitimacy on artificial authority. The question it addresses is why the state has moral authority to rule and the citizen is morally bound to obey.

While both lines of thought serve a justificatory function, it is promise that provides the direct motive for obedience. This is the point I wish to emphasize. Indeed, it is felt that a great advantage of social contract theory consists in its apparently easy solution to the problem of motivation. Why should we obey government? Because we agreed to. Because we have voluntarily committed ourselves to the performance of that behavior. By the typical voluntarist account, the act of promising is taken to be an actual performance, explicit or implicit; and its effectiveness as a motivating force is taken to be direct and certain within the context of a teleological and religious outlook.

Hume's Critique of Social Contract Theory

In Hume's view, the problem with social contract theory essentially lies in its voluntarist aspect. For him, this theory of consent or promise needs to be examined from two angles. The first concerns its historical plausibility as an actual reality, and the second its theoretical validity.

Let us first take a brief look at Hume's denial of the historical plausibility of this alleged consent or promise. While his discussion concerning this issue can be found in many parts of his writings, including the *Second Inquiry*, a few essays, and *History of England*, the most systematic discussion is presented in Section 7 of Part 2 of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, and the essay "Of the Original Contract." Although Hume's critique applies to the whole social contract tradition, his direct target is the Whiggish doctrine in general, and Locke's version in particular. Thus his case against the historical plausibility of consent can be divided into three lines of attack, aiming at the ideas of the original contract, explicit consent and implicit consent.

First, with respect to the idea of the original contract that is supposed to have founded the earliest governments, Hume concedes that this idea can be derived through deduction from human nature. The first government could arise from voluntary consent, since in the state of nature nobody has either the physical power or the normative authority to force others to enter into political society, so it has to be by consent that people can unite together. Both in *Treatise* and in "Of the Original Contract," however, Hume almost immediately denies what he seemingly just granted:

Yet even this consent was long very imperfect, and could not be the basis of a regular administration. ... No compact or agreement, it is evident, was expressly formed for general submission; an idea far beyond the comprehension of savages. (E, "Of the Original Contract," 468–69)

Furthermore, Hume remarks that even if the original contract existed, there would be no reason to think that it was binding on later generations.

The second criticism is directed at the notion of explicit consent, which maintains that the authority of government comes only from free endorsement explicitly given by the people. Put another way, one is obligated to obey government only by one's own explicit promise. Even under the established and mature government "all men are still born equal, and owe allegiance to no prince or government, unless bound by the obligation and sanction of a *promise*" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 474; original emphasis). To Hume this notion "is not justified by history and experience, in any age or country of the world."

On the contrary, we find, every where, princes, who claim their subjects as their property, and assert their independent right of sovereignty, from conquest or succession. We find also, every where, subjects, who acknowledge this right in their prince, and suppose themselves born under obligations of obedience to a certain sovereign, as much as under the ties of reverence and duty to certain parents. These connexions are always conceived to be equally independent of our consent. (E, "Of the Original Contract," 469)

The third criticism is directed at the notion of implicit consent, which maintains that by living under a government and enjoying the public service it provides one implicitly endorses the authority of the regime. Hume's critique focuses on its sacrifice of real choice. For this notion to make good sense, it is necessary that other substantial options are really available to the persons concerned. "Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artisan has a free choice to leave his country, when he knows no foreign

language or manners, and lives from day to day, by the small wages which he acquires?” (E, “Of the Original Contract,” 471) Moreover, if living under a regime would be equated with the grant of consent, even a foreign invader could claim he got the sincere support from the conquered people.

Hume’s trenchant remarks are impressive. But the doubtfulness of the historical reality of consent as a self-conscious performance was easy to notice even in the heyday of classical contractarianism. In fact, Hobbes and Locke, the two representative thinkers in this tradition, both realized the difficulty in accounting for the legitimacy of historical and existing regimes in accordance with the doctrine of consent. Both of them tended to relax their argument and turn to the idea of implicit consent as the way out.¹³ Hobbes even claims that even if no government was ever founded in the way as He maintains, this would just mean that people had not yet done it rationally.¹⁴

Hume was fully aware that mere fact-checking cannot crack the foundation of contract theory: he must undermine the theoretical validity of the duty of promise-keeping. The state had lost its naturalness, but the metaphysically sanctioned duty of fidelity still constituted its foundation. He clearly summarizes this aspect of the logic that underlies the making of social contract theory, “For as all government is plainly an invention of men, and the origin of most governments is known in history, ’tis

¹³ A. John. Simmons, “Voluntarism and Political Associations,” *Virginia Law Review* 67 (1981): 19–37.

¹⁴ Hobbes claims, “For though in all places of the world, men should lay the foundation of their houses on the sand, it could not thence be inferred, that so it ought to be. The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths, consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry; not (as Tennis-play) on Practise onely ...” *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), chap. 20, 136.

necessary to mount higher, in order to find the source of our political duties, if we wou'd assert them to have any *natural* obligation of morality" (T 3.2.8.4; SBN 542). We have briefly noted how Hobbes appeals to deontological language in spite of his naturalistic psychology. It is also widely admitted that the laws of nature are essential to Locke's moral and political theories.¹⁵ Hume's next move is to deprive the obligation of promise of its supernatural sanction, reducing it to purely human convention.

Logically speaking, this requires a confrontation with religion, but Hume cautiously separates his moral and political theory from his scrutiny of religion. While Hume's relation to religion is complicated for many reasons, at least it is safe to say that Hume did not follow the popular practice of his time by including natural religion in his empiricism, but rather combined experimental philosophy with a religious skepticism.¹⁶ In his letters to Hutcheson in 1739 and 1740, the time of the publication of his *Treatise*, he explicitly rejected the notion of final cause, and asked, "What experience have we with regard to superior Beings?" (L I, 40) Moreover, as Duncan Forbes indicates, "The fact is undeniable that in the *Treatise* we have a political philosophy in which there is no mention of God, an unbroken ... uncanny silence with respect to anything to do with religion, natural or revealed."¹⁷ This was very unusual in Hume's time.

Hume avoids repudiation of religious beliefs. He simply reinterprets the conceptions of the will and promise in the context of his naturalistic philosophy. The

¹⁵ Dunn, *Political Thought of Locke*.

¹⁶ This paragraph is mainly based on the discussion in Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chap. 2.

¹⁷ Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, 63.

original intent of his project is to start with the immediately available contents of mental experience and a structured set of original principles of mind to explain all important human phenomena. He questions the reality of any idea whose origin cannot be traced back to impressions. Therefore many metaphysical conceptions are called into question. Although Hume manages to moderate his skeptic conclusions by explaining our fundamental beliefs as products of instinct and passion, it is almost impossible to find a place in his system for the conception of self-determining subject, much less the Kantian transcendental ego which possesses noumenal capacity. Proceeding along this line, Hume unequivocally rejects the metaphysically conceived conception of the will, and embraces the empirical understanding of it, which is quite similar to the understanding of the will in Hobbes's mechanical psychology. On this view, the will is situated entirely in the context of empirical causality. Hume writes, "By the will, I mean nothing but the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind." Far from being the special moral source connected with a supernatural order, the will is merely the effect of certain antecedent perceptions in the mental activity (T 2.3.1.2; SBN 399). Hume's famous view of the impotence of reason further cuts off the link of the will with the metaphysical outlook. Only passion can directly motivate the will. Reason, as Hume defines it, is unequivocally separated from the will, "demonstration and volition seem, upon that account, to be totally removed from each other" (T 2.3.3.2; SBN 413). Without being connected with the supernatural order, the metaphysically conceived willing becomes a mystery. In conclusion, Hume has the following to say about that mysterious conception of the will, "We *feign* a new act of the mind, which we call the *willing* an obligation; and on this we

suppose the morality to depend. But we have prov'd already, that there is no such act of the mind, and consequently that promises imposes no natural obligation" (T 3.2.5.12; SBN 523).

Taken out of its metaphysical context, promise, understood as a natural act of mind, becomes unintelligible, and how it is that a moral obligation attends a promise also becomes a mystery. On Hume's analysis, this "natural unintelligibility" of promise involves two problems. First, people would not naturally come up with the idea of making a promise regarding a future particular performance. In light of his empiricist argument, Hume indicates that there is no natural operation of mind which can be taken as promising. Second, and more important, even if there was a natural act of mind belonging to promise, it would not have any binding force. It would still be inexplicable how it could produce any obligation (T 3.2.5.1–6; SBN 516–18). One can make a promise today and revoke it tomorrow, since one may see no reason to be bound by that word.¹⁸

Therefore, the binding character of promising cannot arise from supernatural sanction, and nor can it be understood as an original fact of human nature. Then how do we explain the fact of our common experience that a promising act does usually generate an obligation to perform a certain particular action in the future? For Hume, the remaining option is obvious: it is explicable only in terms of human conventions arising from long-time evolution.

¹⁸ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Rules, Rights and Promises," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3, no.1 (1978): 318–23.

Hume's account of promising comprises two parts. The first part sets up the relevant human condition. People are naturally self-centered and endowed only with a limited generosity. While it is normal for them to do services in favor of people close to them, they are not easily induced to perform any action for the interests of strangers. However, a lot of human goods hangs on the possibility of having non-intimates do things in the future on our behalf without the use of physical force. Promising is an invented arrangement to solve this fundamental problem. The second part is a rational reconstruction of the historical process by which the convention of promise comes into being. Hume stresses that it does not require highly reflective rationality to form this convention. The practice can evolve from repeated experience of human interaction. Common experience will be sufficient to make us perceive its advantages and enter into the arrangement on the basis of self-interest. Mutual restraint of the persons involved will ensure that it is in everybody's interest to fulfill their commitments. When a person gives a promise, he "is immediately bound by his interest to execute his engagements, and must never expect to be trusted any more, if he refuses to perform what he promised" (T 3.2.5.10; SBN 522). Thus "promises are human inventions, founded on the necessities and interests of society" (T 3.2.5.7; SBN 519).

Interest Theory versus Voluntarism

Having established the implausibility of political voluntarism, Hume feels it justified to entrust the foundation of government wholly to prudential consideration. In

place of promise, Hume puts human interest as the ground for government and allegiance:

A small degree of experience and observation suffices to teach us, that society cannot possibly be maintained without the authority of magistrates, and that this authority must soon fall into contempt, where exact obedience is not payed to it. The observation of these general and obvious interests is the source of allegiance. (E, “Of the Original Contract,” 480)

To be more specific, for Hume, justice is prior to government. Society cannot subsist without justice, which is, as defined by Hume, a system of rules concerning possessing and using property. In the initial stage, society is narrow and closely knit, and justice is easily maintained. But as society increases and wealth accumulates, conflicts of interest will intensify and threaten peace; therefore a government is required to maintain peace and execute justice, and allegiance is needed to ensure the authority of the government (T 3.2.8.2–4; SBN 541–43). An implication of this account is that both promise and allegiance “are built on the same foundation,” namely, the general interest of society, or to be more exact, the mutual interest of all individuals in the society.¹⁹ It is just that the distinct interests promise and allegiance are supposed to serve respectively are different. Political duty derives its binding force from the general interest in maintaining government, while promise acquires its moral sanction from the general interest in generating mutual trust and confidence in the common offices of life. Political duty cannot expect any extra support from the latter. We can see now “how fruitless it is to resolve the one into the other, and seek, in the laws of nature, a stronger foundation for our political duties than interest, and human conventions.”

¹⁹ For a discussion of Hume’s methodological individualism, see Snare, *Morals, Motivation, and Convention*, 220–24 & 246–48.

This account is similar in some fundamental aspects to the rationalist or prudential strain of classical social contract theory. Both of them focus on the practical problem arising from the pre-political human condition and explain government in terms of its usefulness in tackling this problem. Both of them give centrality to the conception of interest. Hume has long been loosely regarded as opposing social contract theory as a whole. What has been widely neglected is that Hume's relation to the two distinct strains in social contract theory was very different. While his posture towards the voluntarist aspect was a firm denial, his attitude towards the rationalist or prudential aspect was much more complicated.

To understand Hume's relation to the rationalist strain of contract theory, we need to look at the larger picture. An important development in Hume studies in the last few decades is the wide recognition that there exists a strong continuity between the account of property and government in the modern natural law tradition and that of Hume.²⁰ While the original intent of natural law tradition is "providing for a justification of existing laws and practices in the light of eternal laws of nature, that arise from human nature," the natural law thinkers such as Grotius and Pufendorf found it difficult to deduce social institutions from their conceptions of human nature but felt it necessary to account for social institutions in terms of human artifice. So for instance, if one finds that Grotius's account of property bears considerable resemblance to that of Hume, it is certainly not a coincidence.²¹ Even in the cases of Hobbes and Locke, it will not be

²⁰ Duncan Forbes's work is pioneering in this regard, see his *Hume's Philosophical Politics*.

²¹ Westerman, "Hume and Natural Lawyers."

amiss to say that Hume took up their empirical and naturalistic psychology and certain fundamental elements of their account of the human condition, although social and historical dimensions figure much more strongly in Hume's eventual theory.

Considering this remarkable continuity, Hume's account of our general interest in having government is not so unique or original. What is special about his account is that Hume sets up the two strands of thought in the contract theory against each other. As I have shown above, the two strands in classical social contract theory justify political authority in different but complementary ways. The rational account is concerned with the practical necessity of government, while the voluntarist account stresses its moral legitimacy. But for Hume, the two accounts are almost incompatible. This view is reflected in the exaggerated fashion in which he summarizes these two doctrines. On his summary, the voluntarist account claims that "men, therefore, are bound to obey their magistrates, only because they promise it" (T 3.2.8.3; SBN 542), and that "the only real foundation of all authority be consent and promise" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 472–73). In a similar tone, he asserts that "government binds us to obedience only on account of its tendency to public utility" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 478), and that "the general obligation, which binds us to government, is the interest and necessities of society" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 473). Hume makes it very clear that the voluntarist line of thought must be entirely rejected. This is a typical example in which the interest theory encroaches upon the territory of voluntarism. Behind it was the great

intellectual shift from a religious and voluntarist outlook to a naturalist and rationalist worldview that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²²

This leads to the question, what is the nature of this invocation of the interest theory in place of promise? What can we know in this case about the role of self-interest in Hume's thought, in particular with regard to the problem of motivation? As indicated in the first section of this chapter, promising as envisioned in social contract theory serves several functions at the same time: as voluntary consent, promising confers moral legitimacy on political power; as voluntary commitment, promising generates moral incentive for obedience to government. Besides, if we strictly follow the notion of the original contract or explicit consent rather than tacit consent, promising is also the very act by which government comes into being. Hume's dispensing with voluntarism left these voids to be filled. As far as our topic is concerned, it is important to note that Hume rejects voluntary commitment as a source of motivation for political allegiance.

Although voluntarism drops out of the picture, the meaning of Hume's invocation of the interest theory remains to be explored. Hume does not think that the interest theory can simply take over all the roles played by voluntarism before. In fact, I will argue below that by Hume's account self-interest can supply *ultimate reason* rather than *direct motive* for political allegiance. Hume's interest-based account of government and allegiance is essentially a prudential justification, focusing on the underlying rationale of political authority and political duty. As regards the origin of government and allegiance,

²² John Dunn, "From Applied Theology to Social Analysis: The Break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 119–35.

Hume is quite suspicious of the functioning of the motive of self-interest. Here a discrepancy between justifying rationale and immediate motive arises.

The Interest-Based Reasoning of the Rationale for Government

Here a terminological clarification is required. The central question of this dissertation is the problem of motivation in a liberal order, namely, what would move people to conform to rules and norms in a liberal order; and we approach the issue of interest theory in relation to that problem. However, the word “interest” or “self-interest” does not always refer to self-interest as a motive. An important distinction needs to be made between the subjective and objective sense of interest. The subjective sense of interest refers to the motive of self-interest, while the objective sense of interest concerns the possible benefit an individual or society can reap in a particular situation. The content of objective interest is objectively determined, no matter whether the persons concerned are aware of it or not. More importantly, in its typical use, objective interest presupposes a difference between fundamental and long-term interests and inconsequential and short-term interests, and identifies itself with the former. This is why objective interest is often called “real interest” or “rational interest.”

Objective interest is often used in an inclusive way in ordinary discourse, but as a political concept appearing on the scene in modern times, its connotation is quite specific. In modern political thought, peace and prosperity instead of morally good life become the primary common good of society, and safety and comfort instead of human excellence are elevated as the fundamental needs of human beings. The substance of objective

interest must be grasped in the light of this intellectual transition. When objective interest is spoken of in modern political theory, it is usually meant to indicate the personal safety, physical comfort and economic advantage of the individual, and the peace and material prosperity of society. In Hobbes's words, the end of government is to ensure peace and "commodious living"; and in Locke's words, people "join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living."²³

When Hume claims that "the general obligation, which binds us to government, is the interest and necessities of society" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 473), by "the interest and necessities of society" he obviously refers to the objective interest of society as just defined. Hume's interest-based account of government and allegiance, as summarized at the beginning of the previous section, clearly focuses on the objective benefit rather than the subjective motive of self-interest. This may well be the reason why his wording is "the interest and necessities of society." In some cases, he does not even mention the word "interest" but simply says that the system of property and government arise from necessity or the convenience of society. This account of objective interest looks at things from the external point of view, whereas the motive of self-interest is by nature related to the internal point of view, or the agent-centered perspective.

From the external point of view, Hume's account is essentially a functional explanation of government. "Human nature cannot by any means subsist, without the association of individuals; and that association never could have place, were no regard paid to the laws of equity and justice. Disorder, confusion, the war of all against all, are

²³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap.13, 79; John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Thomas P. Peardon (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952), chap. 8, sec. 95.

the necessary consequences of such a licentious conduct” (EPM 4.3; SBN 206). The incurable irrationality of human nature makes humans incapable of adhering to the rules of property without external restraint. Government is created to impose the needed discipline and sanction. “It is evident, that, if government were totally useless, it never could have place, and that the sole foundation of the duty of allegiance is the advantage, which it procures to society, by preserving peace and order among mankind” (EPM 4.1; SBN 205).

For Hume, justice as convention governing property is prior to government, and government comes in to mitigate the fragility of the property order. It is in his exposition of justice that this functional analysis characteristic of his account is manifested more clearly. Both in the *Treatise* and in the *Second Inquiry*, Hume famously establishes what commentators call “the Humean circumstances of justice” by surveying several hypothetical situations. If nature provided us with everything we needed, or if people were naturally concerned about the needs of others, the rules of justice would be unnecessary. Going to the opposite extreme, if essential items became so scarce that there was a danger of widespread starvation, or if everyone became rapacious and ignored equity, justice would have to be suspended and people would have to concentrate on their own survival. Only when humans are selfish up to a point, and benevolent up to a point, and when the essentials are sufficient, but not enough to meet every want, does the rules of justice become necessary and useful (T 3.2.2.14–18; SBN 493–95; EPM 3.1–14; SBN 183–88).

This observation and reasoning are intended to uncover the underlying logic of certain social phenomena, and the result is a prudential justification of the relevant social

and political institutional arrangements. Its focus is the rationale of property and government. It proceeds from the external point of view, that is, the supposedly ideal spectator's perspective, not from the agent's point of view; and it does not suppose that people involved in actual institutional evolution reflectively and explicitly have these beliefs. More to our point, it does not concern the direct motive of the agent.

Seen this way, the similarity between this aspect of Hume's account and the rational aspect of social contract theory is clearer. Hume seems quite aware of this similarity. Consider the following comment he made about the natural law tradition as a whole:

Examine the writers on the laws of nature; and you will always find, that, whatever principles they set out with, they are sure to terminate here, at last, and to assign, as the *ultimate reason* for every rule which they establish, the convenience and necessities of mankind. (EPM 3.29; SBN 195; emphasis added)

On the self-conscious level, natural law thinkers derive support for rules from an act of free will of individuals. But for Hume, what really matters is the underlying rationale of those rules.

Now we can consider the unexpected claim mentioned in the very beginning of this chapter, that Hume is contractarian. This claim has to do with a major shift of emphasis that contractarianism has undergone in its contemporary rebirth. Kymlicka captures the feature of this shift nicely:

[T]he emphasis of promising is not what contemporary contract theorists draw from the earlier tradition. They draw on two other elements: (1) obligations are conventional, not divine, arising from the interactions of people who are naturally equal; (2) conventional obligations secure important human interests. Combining these two elements, it is possible to (re)-interpret social contracts not primarily as

promises, but as devices for identifying social conventions that promote the interests of the members of society.²⁴

Without involving the occurrence of promising, social contract becomes hypothetical rather than real. It is primarily considered as an expository device for teasing out the implications of certain moral or political ideas. This species of contractarianism is called “hypothetical contractarianism” by David Gauthier, and it finds important application in some contemporary theories, Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* for instance. “On this view, systems of property and government are legitimated in terms of the consent they would receive from *rational* persons in a suitably characterized position of free choice. The theory does not suppose that this choice is or ought to be expressed in actual agreement, and does not require that the choice enter into actual belief about the rationale of society” (original emphasis).²⁵ This hypothetical contractarianism falls into two major species: the Hobbesian and the Kantian. For the Hobbesian species of contractarianism, the rationale lies only in the individual interest of each and every person, while the Kantian species presupposes certain moral commitment besides considering individual interest.

Obviously, there is a parallel between some features of Hume’s interest-based account of the rationale of government and the contemporary Hobbesian hypothetical

²⁴ Kymlicka, “Social Contract Tradition,” 188. It is to be noted here is that there is an important ambiguity with the conception of “convention,” which can refer both to an agreement among self-interested individuals and to historically evolved arrangement. The former aspect, the imagined agreement, is supposed to be reached among self-interested individuals, or result from their interaction on the basis of self-interested calculation. This idea of self-interested agreement is the focus of contemporary contractarianism and game theory, whereas Hume gives much more weight to the second aspect, although the idea of self-interest agreement is also important in his theory.

²⁵ Gauthier, “David Hume, Contractarian,” 13.

contractarianism: for both of them, the voluntary commitment as an actual performance is ruled out; individual interest or the mutual interest of individuals is taken as the ultimate reason for convention; the underlying rationale of convention becomes the focus, or to be more specific, how individual interest is connected with the relevant convention becomes the focus. In view of this parallel, David Gauthier claims that Hume's theory of property and government is contractarian, and that "the connection between interest and government in Hume's thought can be appropriately expressed by a hypothetical contract." Jean Hampton argues that "the theorist who did most to advance this Hobbesian moral project before the twentieth century in what he took to be the right, and more plausible, direction was David Hume, a philosopher who tends to be incorrectly classed with the Benthamite utilitarians who followed him."²⁶ For them, Hobbes was a pioneer in explaining institutions in terms of self-interested agreement, but Hume gave this way of thinking a refined expression. Indeed, interpreted along these lines, Hume's critique of social contract theory is more like an improvement than a rejection. His replacing promise with interest, in the eyes of contemporary contractarians, amounts to taking up Hobbes's psychological project at the expense of his voluntarism and improving Hobbes's mechanical account in terms of a game-theoretical evolution as far as the origin and maintenance of property and government is concerned.

These contemporary scholars are probably more interested in finding some elements in Hume in support of their own theory than in doing justice to the complexity of Hume's thought. Although interest-based reasoning does play a significant role in Hume's theory, there are fundamental differences between contemporary

²⁶ Hampton, "Two Faces," 37; also see Hampton, *Hobbes and Social Contract*.

contractarianism and Hume's use of this reasoning. For one thing, Hume uses interest-based reasoning to uncover the underlying logic of the existing and historically evolved institutions, while contemporary theory's hypothetical reasoning is intended to be an expository device for extracting the implications of certain moral principles and for generating moral and political designs, in some cases, even blueprints. Hume's reasoning does not contradict his own standpoint that philosophy should limit itself to "methodizing and correcting" actual experience of our common life. By contrast, much of contemporary contractarian theorizing is on the verge of rationalist constructivism as defined by Hayek.²⁷ For another, Hume is acutely sensitive to the social embeddedness of human existence and the concrete process of historical evolution. Along with this sensitivity he has serious reservations about the reliability of self-interested calculation as a motive for rule-following. These factors combine together to lead him to habit and virtue as the primary sources of motivation.

However, the comparison with contemporary hypothetical contractarianism does bring into focus certain features of Hume's thought which would otherwise be downplayed and which are important to notice for our current topic. It helps to highlight the fact that there is a discrepancy between the justifying rationale of a convention and the actual desires, feeling and beliefs that directly motivate people to create and maintain that convention. This discrepancy reveals the nature of Hume's use of the interest theory. Hume's interest-based account of government and allegiance does not or cannot take over all the voids left by voluntarism, but is largely confined to uncovering the underlying

²⁷ F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); also see his "Individualism: True and False," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1–32.

rationale of political power and therefore justifying it. Hume turns to history and virtue to find a direct motive for allegiance.

The Problem of Motivation in Relation to the Origin of Allegiance

Hume questions the view that people can commonly perceive their fundamental interest in instituting and maintaining government in advance, and he also doubts that when people are widely aware of the necessity of government, they obey it primarily because of their continued awareness of that long-term interest. This position has deep roots in his general philosophy; in particular, in his peculiar theories of reason and the passions. I shall examine this background in the next chapter. For now, I confine the discussion to that part of Hume's account of the motive of self-interest which is directly relevant to the issue of government and allegiance.

Hume makes many comments concerning the motive of self-interest. His emphasis varies in different contexts. Actually, Hume can be seen as attempting to argue on two fronts. In the context of refuting political voluntarism, he tends to affirm the significance of the motive of rational interest, whereas in comparing reflective interest with virtuous motives, his attention turns to exposing the unreliability of the calculating motive. In the former case, he naturally highlights common interest as the genuine "foundation" for government and the true "source" for allegiance. In doing so, Hume feels that he has made an important discovery.²⁸ While by "foundation" and "source" he

²⁸ For instance, Hume writes, "This conclusion [allowance has to be made for resistance under certain circumstances] is just, tho' the principle [promise or consent] be erroneous; and I

means the stress to fall on the rationale for government and allegiance, at some points this affirmation also extends to self-interest as a motive when it comes to rejecting the duty of promise keeping as a moral motive for allegiance. It is interesting to note, however, that when speaking of self-interest as a motive Hume cannot help but entertain hesitation and reservation. Consider the following passage:

I perceive, that a promise itself arises entirely from human conventions, and is invented with a view to a certain interest. I seek, therefore, some such interest more immediately connected with government, and which *may be* at once the original motive to its institutions, and the source of our obedience to it. (T 3.2.9.2; SBN 550; emphasis added)

Nor is it [making allowance for resistance under extraordinary circumstances] less infallible, because men cannot distinctly explain the principles, on which it is founded. Few persons can carry on this train of reasoning. ... But tho' this train of reasoning be too subtle for the vulgar, 'tis certain, that all men have an implicit notion of it, and are sensible, that they owe obedience to government merely on account of the public interest. (T 3.2.9.4; SBN 552–53)

It is clear that even in defending interest theory against voluntarism, Hume almost instinctively has reservations about the reliability of calculating interest as a motive.

This suspicion gets full expression only when Hume deliberately adopts the agent's point of view and thus explicitly focuses on the motivational problem rather than the rationale in relation to government and allegiance. In discussing this problem of motivation, Hume distinguishes between the origin of an institution and its maintenance. By his account, the motivational structures involved in these two stages are quite different. Let us first examine how he describes the motivation as related to the origin of government and allegiance, and then consider his account of the motivation that functions to maintain allegiance.

flatter myself that I can establish the same conclusion on more reasonable principles." See T 3.2.9.2; SBN 550.

What is paradoxical about modern contractarianism is that while government is required to cope with the irrationality of humans, contract theory by definition has to depend on a rationalistic project to bring government into being. On the one hand, this theory presents humanity as violent and impetuous, incapable of living together peacefully without external restraint; on the other hand, it has to suppose sufficient rational capacity to be inherent in human nature to enable humans to cooperate on a deliberative and voluntary basis. This problem is best instantiated in Hobbes's theory.²⁹

However, Hume is largely free from this particular trouble. In the foregoing discussion our emphasis is placed on the continuity between the prudential account of social contract theory and Hume's theory of the rationale of government. Hume rests on interest-based reasoning to demonstrate the rationale for government and explains the necessity for government in terms of the irrationality of human nature, but when it comes to the issue of motivation, Hume drastically diverges from that rationalist account. He turns to the concrete process of history and understands the emergence of government as the result of an unconscious growth rather than a deliberate act. He says,

Were all men possessed of so perfect an understanding, *as always to know their own interests*, no form of government had ever been submitted to, but what was established on consent, and was fully canvassed by every member of the society: But this state of perfection is likewise much superior to human nature. *Reason, history, and experience shew us, that all political societies have had an origin much less accurate and regular.* (E, "Of the Original Contract," 474; emphasis added)

The necessity of government seems obvious in retrospective, but Hume doubts that primitive people possess the reflective power for understanding their interest in

²⁹ In discussing Hobbes's account of conflict in the state of nature, Hampton impressively reveals this problem. See *Hobbes and Social Contract*, chap. 2–3.

establishing government at the very beginning and for coordinating with each other to institute a government:

But though this progress of human affairs [instituting government] may appear certain and inevitable, and though the support which allegiance brings to justice, be founded on obvious principles of human nature, *it cannot be expected that men should beforehand be able to discover them, or foresee their operation. Government commences more casually and more imperfectly.* (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 39; emphasis added)

If individuals in the pre-political condition do not have a prior view of the benefit that government can bestow, what initially drives them toward the formation of government cannot be an awareness of that benefit. In other words, political society must largely be an undersigned by-product of human activities, and its emergence must take a long-time process.

Hume does not merely hint at this understanding. To reveal the simplistic character of social contract theory he pictures in detail the possible process by which the government emerges. He writes, “I assert the first rudiments of government to arise from quarrels, not among men of the same society, but among those of different societies.” The military leader in time of war is the first step toward government. “Camps are the true mothers of cities.” The military leader “enjoys a shadow of authority” in time of war but loses it when peace is established. “This authority, however, instructs them in the advantages of government, and teaches them to have recourse to it,” when conflicts of interest intensify (T 3.2.8.1–3; SBN 539–41).

The picture Hume is trying to draw is that people respond to various immediate problems, and the accumulation of the consequences of these responses brings them into political society, without them knowing the destination in advance. Government and

allegiance are essentially an unintended consequences evolving from actions of numerous people over time. The following passage makes this feature clearer:

Each exertion of authority in the chieftain must have been particular, and called forth by the present exigencies of the case: the sensible utility, resulting from his interposition, made these exertions become daily more frequent; and their frequency gradually produced an habitual, and, if you please to call it so, a voluntary, and therefore precarious, acquiescence in the people. (E, "Of the Original Contract," 468–69)

One might contend that it is still self-interest that propels people in their responses to immediate problems. Although the particular interests they pursue in those responses might not be their fundamental interest in the institution of government, they are self-interests after all. While it may well be true that uncultivated people have no idea of the necessity of government in advance, it can still be argued that self-interest is the original motive for the creation of government.

This is to use the conception "the motive of self-interest" in a very loose way. For our purpose, it is important to distinguish between this loose sense of the self-interest motive and a stricter sense of it. In the strict sense, to speak of self-interest as a motive for a particular course of action, that interest must be the very interest that particular course of action will typically satisfy. In other words, the connection between the motive and its resulting action must be deliberate and intentional. Our current question is whether the motive of self-interest can be a strong and stable motivation for allegiance. To raise a question this way is to ask whether our awareness of that long-term interest we can reap from paying allegiance to government can constantly and invariably motivate us loyally to obey civil authority. For the particular interest to qualify as a source of motivation of that sort, one has to be directly aware of that interest; and if the motive

needs to be stable and constant, this awareness must be continually present to mind.

Explicit or implicit, this awareness of the relevant interest must occupy a central place in the subjective motivational set of the agent.

The question of self-interest as the motive for allegiance has to be understood in this narrow sense to be a substantive question. Not surprisingly, it is exactly the way Hume intends the question to be understood. With this question in mind, he indicates that primitive people cannot understand their long-term interest in relation to government in advance, and therefore government arises largely as an unintended result. Thus in the narrow or strict sense of the self-interest motive, we cannot say that self-interest is the original motive for the establishment of government.

Hume draws a picture of the irregular process whereby the earliest rulers come to power. His excellent sense of concreteness in explaining how things move forward step by step cannot be conveyed in a summary manner. I have to quote at length, “The persons, who first attain this distinction [the military leader]...must be endowed with superior personal qualities of valor, force, integrity, or prudence, which command respect and confidence: and after government is established, a regard to birth, rank, and station has a mighty influence over men, and enforces the decrees of the magistrate” (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 39). He continues to describe the steps leading to the eventual institution of public authority:

The prince or leader exclaims against every disorder, which disturbs his society. He summons all his partisans and all men of probity to aid him in correcting and redressing it: and he is readily followed by all indifferent persons in the execution of his office. He soon acquires the power of rewarding these services; and in the progress of society, he establishes subordinate ministers and often a military force, who find an immediate and a visible interest, in supporting his authority...

It is probable, that the first ascendant of one man over multitudes begun during a state of war; ... if the chieftain possessed as much equity as prudence and valour, he became, even during peace, the arbiter of all differences, and could gradually, by a mixture of force and consent, establish his authority. The benefit sensibly felt from his influence, made it be cherished by the people, at least by the peaceable and well disposed among them; ... [government] was still in a feeble state, till the farther progress of improvement procured the magistrate a revenue, and enabled him to bestow rewards on the several instruments of his administration, and to inflict punishment on the refractory and disobedient. *Before that period, each exertion of his influence must have been particular, and founded on the peculiar circumstances of the case.* (E, "Of the Origin of Government," 39–40; emphasis added)

Various passions and immediate interests play motivational roles in this unintended process of state making. By contrast, the awareness of the general interest brought about by public authority does not exist at the beginning of this process; it arises only in a relatively later stage.

It is characteristic of Hume to suppose that people learn to acquire this awareness of long-term interest gradually and as the result of long process. For him, to think otherwise is obviously unhistorical. Actually, the theory of promising presupposes that people have a clear view of their long-term interest in having government. Hume is clearly aware that the interest theory, if understood this way, will bring us back to the doctrine of consent, "Were all men possessed of so perfect an understanding, *as always to know their own interests*, no form of government had ever been submitted to, but what was established on consent" (E, "Of the Original Contract," 474; emphasis added). The undermining of the idea of promise, while commanding much attention of commentators, is merely the first part of Hume's critique of early modern contract theory. It is his emphasis on the historical character of state making that marks the true completion of the job.

The Problem of Motivation in Relation to the Maintenance of Allegiance

As public authority gets instituted and serves its function, “the sense of the general advantage which is reaped from government” comes to be common among the people. In one place, Hume holds that this “opinion of interest,” along with other sorts of opinions, constitutes the foundation of government (E, “Of the First Principles of Government,” 32–33). This awareness of the long-term interest in maintaining government, could certainly serve as direct motive for allegiance in some moments, on some occasions, and among some people. However, Hume’s concern is whether it can be a constant and stable source of motivation which will ensure widespread and continuing obedience to government. Measured by this standard, the awareness of long-term interest does not seem able to afford a stably enduring motive for allegiance.

This brings us to another and more important reason for the unreliability of the motive of self-interest. According to Hume, shortsightedness is only part of the problem. Even if people were commonly able to grasp the necessity of government, some ingrained weakness of human nature would still make it almost impossible for them to constantly follow the guidance of interest. Hume brings out this issue when presenting the difficulties in maintaining the rules of justice, namely, the rules of property, before government comes to the scene.

Yet ... such is the frailty or perverseness of our nature! It is impossible to keep men, faithfully and unerringly, in the paths of justice. Some extraordinary circumstances may happen, in which a man finds his interests to be more promoted by fraud or rapine, than hurt by the breach which his injustice makes in the social union. But much more frequently, he is seduced from his great and important, but distant interests, by the allurements of present, though often very

frivolous temptations. This great weakness is incurable in human nature. (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 38)

People are easily seduced by immediate interest and impulsive passions and cannot steadily adhere to their long-term interest. This incurable weakness of human nature makes it impossible for men to adhere to the rules of justice without external restraint. The government is required to provide this restraint. But Hume is well aware that there is a dilemma here: if people cannot be sufficiently prudent on the duty of justice, how can they suddenly become self-disciplined when it comes to the duty of allegiance?

[I]t may be thought, that nothing is gained by this alliance, and that the factitious duty to obedience, from its very nature, lays as feeble a hold of the human mind, as the primitive and natural duty of justice. *Peculiar interests and present temptations may overcome the one as well as the other.* They are equally exposed to the same inconvenience. And the man, who is inclined to be a bad neighbour, must be led by *the same motives*, well or ill understood, to be a bad citizen and subject. (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 38)

According to Hume, this incurable weakness of human nature greatly undermines the effectiveness of the awareness of the necessity of government as the motivation of allegiance. He even goes as far as saying that “a great present advantage ... can lead us to rebellion, by making us over-look the remote interest, which we have in the preserving of peace and order in society” (T 3.2.8.7; SBN 545).³⁰

³⁰ One may object that the power of government can by itself overcome any disobedience and force men into obedience. But that would bring us to another dilemma: government has to command the allegiance of a sufficient proportion of people in society in order to have sufficient power to exercise in the first place. Besides, no regime can last long by simply resorting to coercion. Hume knows this better than most of his contemporaries. He observes, “Nothing appears more surprising ... than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion” (E, “Of the First Principles of Government,” 32).

In the *Treatise*, although Hume's emphasis is on the necessity of government as the ultimate reason for allegiance, he indicates that custom and imitation as the principles of human nature have important roles to play in the maintenance of allegiance. The awareness of the necessity of government "first produces those instances of submission, which we imitate, and that train of actions, which produces the custom..." (T3.2.9.4; SBN 553) when Hume explicitly takes up the actor's point of view, he gives more prominence to the role of habituation. A constant and stable political loyalty has its source not in a reflective awareness of interest but in a certain unreflective propensity formed through a long process of habituation. This process of habituation begins when civil authority is still in the middle of its development. State making is a long process, and "the long continuance of that state ... enured the people to submission" (E, "Of the Origin of Government," 40).

Habit soon consolidates what other principles of human nature had imperfectly founded; and men, once accustomed to obedience, never think of departing from that path, in which they and their ancestors have constantly trod, and to which they are confined by so many urgent and visible motives. (E, "Of the Origin of Government," 39; emphasis added)

When government grows to maturity and executes justice, allegiance also takes shape as a habit or disposition. In Hume's words, this is "the common course of the matter."

We find also, every where, subjects, who acknowledge this right in their prince, and suppose themselves born under obligations of obedience to a certain sovereign, as much as under the ties of reverence and duty to certain parents. ... *obedience and subjection becomes so familiar, that most men never make any enquiry about its origin or cause,* more than about the principle of gravity, resistance, or the most universal laws of nature. Or if curiosity ever move them; as soon as they learn, that they themselves and their ancestors have, for several ages, or from time immemorial, been subject to such a form of government or such a family; they immediately acquiesce, and acknowledge their obligation to allegiance. (E, "Of the Original Contract," 470; emphasis added)

Along with the habituation of allegiance comes the moral sentiment of approval towards this tendency of loyalty. This sentiment helps reinforce the existing tendency. Moreover, “Education, and the artifice of politicians, concur in bestowing a farther morality on loyalty, and branding all rebellion with a greater degree of guilt and infamy” (T 3.2.8.7; SBN 546).

There is another aspect to the issue of allegiance. Allegiance, unlike justice and fidelity, is not merely a matter of observance of general rules. Under many circumstances, the allegiance is paid not merely to political system but to some specific person or group who holds the power. According to Hume, this aspect of allegiance is in the form of an emotional attachment, which typically results from habituation. When any new regime comes to power, it takes time for the people to get accustomed to their new ruler. But long possession will evoke an emotional attachment among the people to the established authority.

When a new government is established, by whatever means, the people are commonly dissatisfied with it, and pay obedience more from fear and necessity, than from any idea of allegiance or of moral obligation. The prince is watchful and jealous, and must carefully guard against every beginning or appearance of insurrection. Time, by degrees, removes all these difficulties, and accustoms the nation to regard, as their lawful or native princes, that family, which, at first, they considered as usurpers or foreign conquerors. (E, “Of the Original Contract,” 474–75)

In some cases, this emotional attachment can go so deep that it lasts for a long time even after that relevant ruler or ruling family is dethroned, as illustrated in Jacobitism, the political movement dedicated to the restoration of the Stuart Kings to the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland. In brief, allegiance is considered by Hume as a major item of “artificial virtues.” This virtue consists of a habituated inclination to obey

government and an emotional attachment to specific ruler or his group. It is essentially an habitual disposition.

Actually, one can argue that there is something paradoxical about the reflective awareness of the general interest in obedience to government. By Hume's account, government is instituted only when the society has gone beyond the primitive stage and developed into a "large and polish'd" one. Under normal circumstances, if government serves its function tolerably well, and if people have accepted its authority, the sense of that relevant long-term interest for most of the people will largely retreat into the background of the mind, and the connection between that long-term interest and everyday's concerns will become indirect and obscure. The obedience will for the most part be habitual, and people's reflective consciousness will be focused on immediate issues and everyday activities.

On the other hand, if that general interest becomes the focus of attention for the majority, or if that remote, long-term interest turns into the pressing concern, it more often than not means that something goes wrong with governance. People can easily lose sight of their general and long-range interest, but they cannot ignore the concrete and immediate harm done to them. Hume pays much attention to this fact, particularly when it comes to the formation of moral sentiment. Hume thinks that our moral appraisal of certain character traits arises from the consideration of beneficial or pernicious consequences caused by that trait. Knowing well that a sense of remote benefit is too general and weak to call forth strong sentimental response, Hume maintains that it is often the immediate harm caused by the non-performance of a virtue that stimulates

people's moral sensitivity to that virtue (T 3.2.2.24–25; SBN 499–500; T 3.2.8.6–7; SBN 545–46).

This fact further explains why in Hume's view the motive of reflective self-interest cannot be counted on to motivate political allegiance. In addition to its inability to afford a constant and stable source of motivation, there is a risk in enhancing this awareness: the constant awareness of the general interest which government is supposed to satisfy, if common to the people, might well help undermine the functioning of government under certain circumstances. This continuing awareness could easily lead to a constant vigilance among the citizens against the government. Instead of being respected, public authority will be subjected to constant scrutiny. Even in today's best cases of liberal democracy, where reflexivity in politics has been significantly developed, the focus of political review and public opinion is usually on specific policy rather than on the regime itself. A widespread critical reflection on the fundamental institutional arrangement in society would be more of a sign of crisis than of normal politics.

On this subject, Hume's position can be best seen in his view on the debate between the doctrine of the right of resistance and the doctrine of passive obedience. The former doctrine stresses that government binds us to obedience only on account of its tendency to public utility, and therefore the duty of obedience ceases when government fails to do its part. In a sense, this doctrine of the right of resistance is a typical manifestation of the constant awareness of the society's ultimate purpose in maintaining government. Hume grants legitimacy to resistance "in extraordinary emergencies," but claims that it is impossible to give a fixed definition with regard to these emergencies

beforehand. More to the point, he warns that it would be dangerous to attempt this kind of definition.

And here I must confess, that I shall always incline to their side, who draw the bond of allegiance very close, and consider an infringement of it, as the last refuge in desperate cases, when the public is in the highest danger, from violence and tyranny. ... *as obedience is our duty in the common course of things, it ought chiefly to be inculcated*; nor can any thing be more preposterous than an anxious care and solicitude in stating all the cases, in which resistance may be allowed. ... Would he [a philosopher] not be better employed in inculcating the general doctrine, than in displaying the particular exceptions? (E, "Of Passive Obedience," 490–91)

Here Hume draws an important distinction between general tendency and particular exception. He finds important things with which to agree in both of the two doctrines, but he stresses that in practice one cannot solve the problem of allegiance by simply combining the correct elements of both doctrines into a single balanced theory. The attitude of citizens toward their government cannot be treated simply as a matter of ideas or ideologies. Rather, it is essentially a matter of disposition.

The obsession with the ultimate interest could disrupt the shaping of the disposition to obedience. At worst, it could make resistance to be "a disposition to rebellion" (E, "Of Passive Obedience," 490). For Hume, the genuine choice is not between the two doctrines, but the two dispositions. The tendency to obedience is to be "in the common course of things," and thus ought to become our disposition. By contrast, the sense of the ultimate interest will not be and cannot be constantly present to the mind.

It will come to the fore only in response to some unusual events:

It [the doctrine of the right of resistance] was yet entirely superfluous; since no man, on the approach of extraordinary necessity, could be at a loss, though not directed by legal declarations, to find the proper remedy: That even those who might, at a distance, and by scholastic reasoning, exclude all resistance, would yet

hearken to the voice of nature; when evident ruin, both to themselves and to the public, must attend a strict adherence to their pretended principles. (HE, 6:294)

In other words, the awareness of the ultimate interest cannot be trusted to be a reliable motive for obedience to government, but it has an important role to play. It stays in the background of our consciousness, and comes out only if our fundamental interest is under imminent and present threat.³¹

³¹ For a contemporary analysis of this feature of the sense of self-interest, see Philip Pettit, "The Virtual Reality of Homo Economicus," *The Monist* 78, no.3 (1995): 308–30.

Chapter Three

The Unreliability of the Motive of Rational Self-Interest

By examining Hume's critique of early modern contractarianism, the preceding chapter presented a typical way in which the interest approach took center stage by repudiating voluntarism. It is important to note that Hume's treatment of the interest theory must be analyzed within a historical context. Only a historically sensitive reading can reveal his actual account of self-interest. During Hume's time, the theory of interest was still being formulated. Hume did not simply embrace this theory without reserve. He tried to establish its great merit, but more relevant for the purposes of this discussion, he attempted to identify its limitation. The previous chapter showed how Hume develops the distinction between interest as justifying reason and interest as motive. This chapter will attend more closely to his treatment of the motive of self-interest.

For Hume, people certainly can act in a calculating way, from time to time, just as they often act on violent passions or pursue disinterested goals. However, because he considers the motive of self-interest in relation to the problem of conforming to general rules, he raises questions as to whether self-interested calculation is a stable and constant state of mind among common people. This chapter will demonstrate that, given Hume's account of human nature, particularly his theory of reason and passion, he simply cannot follow the typical model of rational man and imagine a widespread stable mixture of self-

love and rational calculation. Furthermore, his alternative model of prudence, developed on the basis of passions, proves to be no less demanding than the rationalist model.

The conclusion of Hume's examination is that one cannot appeal to either a general rational agency or a general virtue as a common means to guarantee conformity to liberal rules. Under most circumstances, a stable and enduring motive to acts of justice cannot be taken as an exercise of a general capacity or a manifestation of a general virtue. Rather, the motive has to be a distinctive virtue, strictly matching a distinct institution or convention. This sort of virtue has to be context-dependent and is shaped and sustained in that context.

Interest as a Political Concept

Interest as a political concept is a typical creation of modern thought. It emerged in the sixteenth century and captured the European imagination during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ In order to show how Hume's understanding of interest is distinctive, one must first examine the way in which this concept functions in modern political thought.

Hirschman's book, *The Passions and the Interests*, is widely regarded as a classical study of the idea of interest. According to Hirschman, the idea of interest came to the fore essentially as a result of a modern attempt to improve statecraft. "A feeling

¹ See J. A. Gunn, "'Interest Will Not Lie': A Seventeenth-Century Political Maxim," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, no. 4 (1968): 551–64; and Stephen G. Engelmann, *Imagining Interest in Political Thought: Origin of Economic Rationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

arose in the Renaissance and became a firm conviction during the seventeenth century that moralizing philosophy and religious precept could no longer be trusted with restraining the destructive passions of men.”² New ways had to be found, and people turned their attention from the higher realms of the human soul to the lower realms. Thus, the classification and analysis of the passions became a major topic in the seventeenth century. Impressed by remarkable differences among the passions, people began to think that it might be possible to use calm and moderate passions to counterbalance violent and destructive ones.³ For example, Hobbes classifies a group of passions that are favorable to peace and order, such as the fear of death, and the desire for comfortable living, as candidates for serving the countervailing function.⁴

The term “interest” as a political concept gained currency in the late sixteenth century. “It comprises the totality of human aspirations, and also denotes an element of reflection and calculation with respect to the manner in which these aspirations are to be pursued.” It initially emerged in the context of state policy making, suggesting a practical and calculating manner to conduct state affairs. Later on, a number of thinkers applied the idea to general human conduct, developing it into a dominant concept in social, economic, and political theory.⁵ As a more general formulation of the idea of the countervailing passion, the term, interest, was invoked to represent the stable, rational, and productive

² Albert Hirschman, *Passions and Interests* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 14–15.

³ *Ibid.*, 14–31.

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, especially chap. 13–15.

⁵ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 42.

force in human nature. Instead of pitting passion against passion, this new formulation took the form of opposing interest to passion. More to the point, the idea is that violent and pernicious passions can be most effectively counterbalanced by allowing the rational pursuit of private interest.⁶

Hirschman's story has a seemingly happy ending. In the eighteenth century, as the concept of interest was increasingly centered on money-making, it came to be regarded as a dominant motive of human nature. Accordingly, the variety and complexity of human passions were reduced into this single motive. In Adam Smith's work, for example, various passions are either ignored or made to feed into this dominant motive of rational self-interest, doing nothing but reinforcing it.⁷ Actually, the naturalness of the interest motive has since been taken for granted in such a way that, were it not for Hirschman's story, the historical origin of the concept of interest, and its connection with the idea of the countervailing passion, would remain in oblivion.

This idea of men being invariably guided by interest is unique to the modern imagination. For interest to serve its supposed function, it must be a naturally given motive. However, this alleged naturalness is problematic and the problem arises from the fundamental fact that the interested motive is a mixture of two elements, namely self-seeking and rational calculation.

Since its emergence, the idea of interest has both concerned human aspirations and indicated the calculating manner in which these aspirations were to be pursued.

⁶ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 31–32.

⁷ Ibid., 100–13; also see Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (NY: The Modern Library, 1965), 324–25 & 508.

Although the pre-modern understanding of the diversity of aspirations gradually gave way to the reductionist view of human needs and wants, the dualistic feature of the idea of interest remained unchanged. This duality is also reflected in common phrases, such as “enlightened self-interest” and “reasonable self-love,” and it represents a mixture of self-seeking and calculating rationality, or the rational pursuit of private advantage.

Hirschman interprets this dual structure in terms of the traditional opposition of passion and reason that is prevalent in the history of Western philosophy. Hirschman writes,

Interest appeared so self-evident a notion that nobody bothered to define it precisely. Nor did anyone explain the place it occupied in relation to the two categories that had dominated the analysis of human motivation since Plato, namely, the passions on the one hand, and reason on the other. But it is precisely against the background of this traditional dichotomy that the emergence of a third category in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century can be understood. Once passion was deemed destructive and reason ineffectual, the view that human action could be exhaustively described by attribution to either one or the other meant an exceedingly somber outlook for humanity. A message of hope was therefore conveyed by the wedging of interest in between the two traditional categories of human motivation. Interest was seen to partake in effect of the better nature of each, as the passion of self-love upgraded and contained by reason, and as reason given direction and force by that passion. The resulting hybrid form of human action was considered exempt from the destructiveness of passion and the ineffectuality of reason. No wonder that the doctrine of interest was received at the time as a veritable message for salvation!⁸

The substantial difference between passion and reason raises a question about the coherence of the concept of the motive of rational self-interest. How can these two elements be combined into a single motive? The combination is supposed to be natural, but a close look will show that it seems quite unnatural. The point of the concept of interest is precisely to ground social order in certain natural human motives so that peace and order can be firmly established without the transformation of human dispositions. To

⁸ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 43–44.

make this idea work, the motive of self-interest has to be naturally given and enduringly stable. Divested of this naturalness, interest will lose much of its magical power.

However, it is quite uncertain that interest, as the mixture of passion and reason, can meet these requirements. This mixed character imbues the concept with fragility and ambiguity, which is reflected in the uncertainty of the meaning of interest, both in ordinary language and in academic discourse. Since a natural mixture of passion and reason is quite unnatural to imagine, people often gravitate towards either reason or passion when applying the concept. If the emphasis is placed on the passion of self-love, interest will feel like a violent impulse that needs to be restrained; whereas if the element of rationality is the focus, interest will look more like a normative directive than a natural human propensity. For the same reason, the common phrases “enlightened self-interest,” “reasonable self-love,” or “self-interest rightly understood” are not very helpful. Actually, it may well be that these common phrases help expose the unnaturalness of the supposed combination.

Seeking private advantage is almost a natural fact of human nature. What makes the idea of interest new and distinctive is its three features. First, this pursuit of private advantage is supposed to be guided by rational calculation; second, this motive of rational self-interest is supposed to be natural to man; and third, this natural motive of rational self-interest is supposed to be commonly dominant in humankind’s motivational structure. Without these supposed features, the natural basis for the social order cannot be provided in the way the interest theory expects it to be. Considered this way, the motive of self-interest is much more complicated than it at first seems. As I shall show below, the

motive of self-interest makes best sense only within the context of Enlightenment rationalism.

Self-Interest as “the First Motive”

Hume features prominently in Hirschman’s narrative. The heart of Hirschman’s book is found in Part I, which outlines the history of the idea of pitting interest against passion. In the core section of Part I, “The Principle of the Countervailing Passion,” Hirschman names Spinoza and Hume as two heroes “who gave the idea a far more central place in their system.”⁹ The next few sections of the book successively show how “interest” came to be taken “as Tamers of the Passions” and “as a New Paradigm,” and how it became centered on money-making. Hume occupies a place in each of these sections. In the final section of Part I, “Money Making as a Calm Passion,” Hirschman again finds a good example in Hume’s writing.¹⁰

Considering Hume’s frequent use of the term “interest,” this is not surprising. But as we have seen and will continue to see, Hume has serious reservations about the role of self-interest as motivation. To grasp the nature of Hume’s treatment of the motive of self-interest, it is important to know for what purpose he turns to this idea. In Hume’s moral and political theory, the issue of self-interest enters into the picture essentially in relation to artificial rules and institutions. As indicated in this dissertation’s introduction, what is characteristic of Hume’s moral and political theory is the distinction between nature and

⁹ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63–66.

artifice. People cannot survive and prosper without living together in society. Society begins with natural relations, like immediate and extended family, and expands to neighbors, friends, and the local community. Within this scope of human relations, Hume grants that people, more or less, have a benevolent concern for the welfare of others close to them. This position both distinguishes Hume from Hobbes, who tends toward philosophical egoism, and distances Hume from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who argue for the reality of “universal benevolence.”

However, what is significant about Hume is that he restricts the entire debate about the naturalness of self-love versus benevolence to this level of human life. Beyond this level, human relations are essentially relations among non-intimates and strangers, and social order and morality have to be the product of human artifice and contrivance. In this realm of artificial institutions, not only will the natural passion of self-love easily lead to acts of injustice, but natural benevolence will also become problematic. People’s natural benevolence towards others is largely confined to persons close to them. Beyond this close circle, the partiality of limited benevolence may easily cause people to violate rules. As Hume observes, “their selfishness and *confin’d generosity*, acting at their liberty, totally incapacitate them for society” (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499; emphasis added).¹¹ The point to appreciate is that the motivations involved in the maintenance of artificial institutions must themselves be the product of human artifice. To the extent that natural passions have a role in motivating compliance with rules, these natural passions, including natural

¹¹ Hume makes a distinction between “artificial” and “arbitrary,” for instance, he says, “Tho’ the rules of justice be artificial, they are not arbitrary” (T 3.2.1.19; SBN 484).

benevolence and compassion, need to undergo a transformation before serving that function.

The typical statement Hume makes with regard to the role of redirected interest is that it is the “first motive” or the “original motive” to the establishment of artificial rules and institutions. Regarding justice, Hume writes, “*self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice*” (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499; original emphasis), and “self-love ... produces the rules of justice, and is the *first* motive of their observance” (T 3.2.8.5; SBN 543; original emphasis). With regard the concept of promise as practice, Hume writes, “Interest is the *first* obligation to the performance of promises” (T 3.2.5.11; SBN 523; original emphasis). In this aspect, the case of allegiance is similar to those of justice and promise. Hume writes, “Tho’ the object of our civil duties be the enforcing of our natural [duties], yet the *first* motive of the invention, as well as performance of both, is nothing but self-interest” (T 3.2.8.5; SBN 544; original emphasis).

Note that, in all of these statements, Hume highlights the word “first” or “original.” This emphasis has both positive and negative meanings. Viewed positively, redirected interest is the “first motive” in the sense that it serves as the dominant motive in the origin and establishment of relevant institutions. Viewed negatively, Hume tends to limit the motivational role of self-interest to the first stage of relevant institutions, or at least to reduce it to a subsidiary status when a liberal order gets fully developed.

The Passion of Self-Interest

To identify Hume's problem with the motive of self-interest, one must place his views in a wider context. Hume writes extensively about self-interest. If one simply takes his comments out of context, one may easily lose view of the subtle yet fundamental differences between his understanding of self-interest and the standard idea of rational self-interest. In this regard, Hirschman's misinterpretation of Hume is typical.

Few studies directly examine Hume's treatment of self-interest. Hirschman is one prominent exception.¹² Unfortunately, his approach is more misleading than illuminating. Since Hirschman's concern is more about using Hume's case to illustrate the doctrine of interest than about interpreting Hume's thought, Hume's problem with this doctrine is ignored and even concealed.

To illustrate how Hume is committed to the principle of the countervailing passion, Hirschman quotes a famous passage from the *Treatise*:

There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident, that the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty, and that in preserving society, we make much greater advances in the acquiring of possessions, than in the solitary and forlorn condition.¹³

On its face, this passage seems to be an example of the idea of pitting passion against passion. However, a closer look shows that Hume is not referring to pitting moderate and

¹² For other treatments of Hume's understanding of interest, see Engelmann, *Imagining Interest*, 26–27; and Franklin A. Kalinowski, "David Hume on the Philosophic Underpinnings of Interests Group Politics," *Polity* 25, No. 3 (Spring 1993): 355–74.

¹³ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 25; the quoted passage of Hume is from T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492.

productive passions against immoderate and destructive passions. Instead, Hume suggests the idea of the interested passion redirecting itself. The idea of playing a passion against itself was not unusual in Hume's time, what is special about this passage is that Hume applies this idea to the very passion that is supposed by the interest theory to constitute the passionate component of the motive of rational self-interest. He refers to this passion as "the interested affection." Although Hume follows the interest theory in thinking that the interested passion is amenable to rational calculation, he claims that this passion itself is the very problem that needs to be dealt with. This striking difference between Hume's analysis and the standard theory of interest is simply ignored by Hirschman.

If one looks at the context in which this passage is situated, Hirschman's prejudicial reading becomes more obvious. As indicated in the previous section, it is in discussing the origin of artificial institutions that Hume invokes the concept of interest. The passage quoted above is taken from the central part of Hume's account of justice in the *Treatise*. According to this account, the greatest obstacle to peaceful coexistence of individuals and groups is precisely this "interested affection," and the rules of justice are established to restrain this passion and prevent it from destroying society. This view is underscored in the following passage:

All the other passions, besides this of interest, are either easily restrain'd, or are not of such pernicious consequence, when indulg'd. *Vanity* is rather to be esteem'd a social passion, and a bond of union among men. *Pity* and *Love* are to be consider'd in the same light. And as to *envy* and *revenge*, tho' pernicious, they operate only by intervals, and are directed against particular persons, whom we consider as our superiors or enemies. This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society. There scarce is any one, who is not actuated by it; and there is no one, who has not reason to fear from it, when it acts without any restraint, and gives way to its first and most natural movements. So that upon the whole, we are to esteem the difficulties in the establishment of

society, to be greater or less, according to those we encounter in regulating and restraining this passion. (T 3.2.2.12; SBN 491–92; original emphasis)

In this passage, the contrast to the interest theory cannot be sharper. As Hirschman nicely shows in his book, the central point of the interest theory is that by combining passion and reason, the motive of rational self-interest is “considered exempt from both the destructiveness of passion and the ineffectuality of reason.”¹⁴ It is precisely because it is such an effectual and rationally guided motive that the motive of rational self-interest can counteract those typical destructive passions, such as political fantasy, militant glory, factional hatred, or religious enthusiasm. According to Hume, however, the passion of interest is “directly destructive of society”; it is the most fundamental threat to social order. He variously calls it “the passion of self-interest,” “the interested affection” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492), “a concern for our private interest” (T 3.2.1.10; SBN 480), “the interested passions” (T 3.2.6.6; SBN 529), or. This interested passion is not merely confined to avidity or love of gain, but extends to other original appetites and the passion of self-interest in the broad sense. Thus, Hume also refers to it as “natural appetites” (T 3.2.8.5; SBN 543), or simply “self-love” (T 3.2.8.5; SBN 543) and “selfishness” (T 3.2.2.5; SBN 486).¹⁵ What is more, the interested passion can even involve private benevolence, “their selfishness and confin’d generosity, acting at their liberty, totally incapacitate them for society” (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499). This is the fact that I wish to

¹⁴ Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 43–44.

¹⁵ Consider, for example, the following passages, (1) “The selfishness of men is animated by the few possessions we have, in proportion to our wants; and ‘tis to restrain this selfishness, that men have been oblig’d to separate themselves from community, and to distinguish betwixt their own goods and those of others” (T 3.2.2.16; SBN 495); (2) “Self-love, when it acts at its liberty, instead of engaging us to honest actions, is the source of all injustice and violence; nor can a man ever correct those vices, without correcting and restraining the natural movements of that appetite” (T 3.2.1.10; SBN 480).

emphasize: although Hume usually speaks of “the passion of interest” in the singular, what he has in mind is a class of original passions directed toward the most fundamental needs of human beings, such as safety, physical comfort and property.

In light of interest theory, the passionate element of interest is supposed to be moderate, calm, stable, and productive. These characteristics are required if this passion is to be easily amenable to rational calculation and smoothly combined with practical reason. However, the picture Hume presents of this passion is exactly the opposite. By his account, the “interested affection,” acting by itself, could be destructive to society. Its natural tendency is “irregular and incommodious,” “partial and contradictory,” and “heedless and impetuous” (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489). As indicated above, Hume even equates this passion with the general tendency of “selfishness” or “self-love.” To make things worse, Hume suggests that no other natural passions are capable of overcoming it: “’Tis certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counter-balance the love of gain, and render men fit members of society” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492). Some scholars claim that this interested passion is morally neutral. However, the picture Hume gives of it strongly suggests that its natural tendency leans heavily towards the side of vice. The trouble could not be more serious.

By characterizing the interested passion in this way, Hume takes issue with some of the fundamental assumptions of the interest theory. If the “natural tendency” of this passion is really so impetuous and destructive, it is difficult to understand how the passion is amenable to rational reasoning. Thus neither the idea of interest as a countervailing passion, nor the idea of men being invariably guided by interest, makes sense any longer. How could it be possible for Hume to start with such a “directly

destructive” passion and end up agreeing with those who believe in rational interest?

Where does this position lead Hume to? To answer this question, we need to take

another look at that crucial passage quoted by Hirschman:

There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since ‘tis evident, that the passion is much better satisfy’d by its restraint, than by its liberty. (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492)

It must be admitted that the meaning of the passage is quite ambiguous. How does any passion proceed to oppose itself? Hume’s explanation is “by an alteration of its direction.” However, this explanation seems to make things more confusing, since Hume’s remarks just quoted above should leave no doubt that, by itself, the interested affection is inherently unrestrained. Where does the passion obtain its new direction? The next sentence provides a clue: “this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection.” Unfortunately, the interested passion does not contain any rational element. The required reflection, no matter how “least” it may be, can only come from outside the passion.

In places where Hume does not speak of the doubtful self-regulation of the interested passion, his message becomes clearer: in order for the passion of interest to become moderate and productive, it has to be guided by practical reason,

The remedy, then, is not deriv’d from nature, but from artifice; or more properly speaking, nature provides a remedy in the *judgment and understanding*, for what is *irregular and incommodious* in the affections. (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489; emphasis added)

In this passage, the interested passion is clearly distinguished from “judgment and understanding.” Thus there is no such thing as self-redirection of the passion of interest; only “judgment and understanding” will operate to correct the “irregular and

incommodious” tendencies of the interested affection. If one understands where “judgment and understanding” eventually lead, the implausibility of the self-controlling of the interested passion becomes more obvious. Recall that it is in relation to the origin and stability of society that the interested passion becomes the greatest problem. The way to deal with this problem is to establish the rules of justice. These rules are not naturally available but must arise through artifice and convention: “Those rules, by which property, right, and obligation are determin’d, have in them no marks of a natural origin, but many of artifice and contrivance.” These rules are “artificial, as being purposely contriv’d and directed to a certain end” (T 3.2.6.6; SBN 528–29). In other words, these rules are product of “judgment and understanding.”

Hume’s way of presenting the situation strongly suggests the necessity for restraining and transforming violent passions of interest. On the one hand, the interested passion has its natural and substantive tendency, characterized as “partial,” “heedless,” “impetuous,” and “directly destructive of society,” and these pose the greatest threat to society. On the other hand, only the rules of justice can maintain peace and stability, which implies the necessity for certain human motives capable of rousing men to obey these rules. The gap between the interested passion’s natural tendency and the needed motivation for rule-following cannot be bridged without restraining and transforming the former. To be sure, Hume’s discussion also includes elements similar to the standard doctrine of interest, so there is some ambiguity in his account of justice. Considering the substance of this account, however, it is difficult to see how he can seriously follow the latter line of thought.

To summarize, Hume stresses the diversity and heterogeneity of the passions. The typical term in his account of passion is “natural tendency.” For him, all passions have their own natural tendency, and particularly, the natural tendency of the original passions related to the artificial virtues are usually recalcitrant, heedless and impetuous. A fundamental precondition of the standard doctrine of interest is the existence of certain calm and productive passions, which are easily amenable to practical reasoning and thus generate the motive of rational interest to counterbalance other pernicious passions. Hume’s view sharply conflicts with this theory, and the logical conclusion his view leads to can only be the restraint and transformation of natural passions. What figures prominently in Hume’s picture is not the smooth cooperation between passion and reason but the confrontation between them.

The focus in the case of justice is the passion of interest in its narrow sense, which centers upon avarice and wealth-seeking. Hume shows that this favorite passion in the interest theory is more of a problem than a solution. This situation is certainly not confined to the virtue of justice. It is similar with other artificial virtues. The analysis of the problem with the passion of interest directly applies to the virtue of promise. In the cases of civility, allegiance and sexual morality, the confrontation between passion and reason is more directly presented.

Regarding the virtue of politeness, pride is the problematic passion. “As we are, all of us, proud in some degree, pride is universally blam’d and condem’d by all mankind; as having a natural tendency to cause uneasiness in others by means of comparison” (T 3.3.2.7; SBN 596). Hume also notes, however, a proper degree of pride is necessary for everybody, but humans must not directly show that passion.

In like manner, therefore, as we establish the *laws of nature*, in order to secure property in society, and prevent the opposition of self-interest; we establish the *rules of good-breeding*, in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive. (T 3.3.2.10; SBN 597; original emphasis)

Hume parallels the case of justice with that of politeness. However, he does not mention the idea of self-regulation of the interested passion. Considering Mandeville's famous embrace of the idea of playing pride against itself, Hume's silence on this idea is especially worth noting. Here the case of justice is presented simply as the restraint of the self-interested passion by the rules of justice, and similarly, he suggests restraining our natural pride by the rules of civility.

In the case of allegiance, License and love of dominion are the problematic passions. Here, the parallel with justice is drawn again, and the emphasis is also on restraining passion. The confrontation between passion and reason as concerns allegiance is more obvious, since for him the passions of license and love of dominion must be "sacrifice[d]."

For as it is evident, that every man ... is naturally impelled to extend his acquisition as much as possible; and nothing can restrain him in this propensity, but reflection and experience ... The case is precisely the same with the political or civil duty of allegiance, as with the natural duties of justice and fidelity. Our primary instincts lead us, either to indulge ourselves in unlimited freedom, or to seek dominion over others: And it is reflection only, which engages us to sacrifice such strong passions to the interests of peace and public order. (E, "Of the Original Contract," 481)

In all these cases interest can not take the form of a countervailing passion. What can operate to restrain problematic passions can only be practical reason, which will be our topic in the next section.

Hume's position with regard to the standard doctrine of interest can be better understood when placed within a historical context. Early modern thinkers who engaged with the idea of countervailing passions and the doctrine of interest can be divided into two groups. Some thinkers, such as Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, and Mandeville, belonged to the Epicurean or Augustinian tradition. For them, human nature is characterized by the diversity of passions and is even often divided by conflicting passions. They regard self-interest as an ambiguous force that provides a precarious foundation for the social order. Other thinkers, such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Smith, belonged to the Stoic tradition. They believed in the harmony between the interest of the individual and the interest of society. They also proposed the possibility of the universal benevolence of man and the harmony between interest and virtue.¹⁶

The significance of the contrast between these differing positions will be clearer if we consider them along the temporal dimension. As far as the underlying logic is concerned, Hirschman's story unfolds in three stages. The first stage is the rise of the idea of pitting passion against passion. The second involves the idea of setting rational interest against pernicious passions. In the third and final stage, heterogeneous passions are reduced into a homogeneous interest, and this interest becomes the dominant motive of human behavior. The first idea, that of setting one passion against another or even playing the same passion against itself, is not difficult to grasp. However, it is also widely

¹⁶ Pierre Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 2; There are certainly important differences between the Epicurean tradition and the Augustinian tradition, but as far as the understanding of passion and interest is concerned, what is common to them is more important for our discussion.

admitted that the effect of this type of counterbalance is by nature unreliable. Pascal was struck by the possibility of using people's credulity to prevent rebelliousness, but he was aware that the very same vice could equally be used to foment rebellion. The unreliability of playing a passion against its own excessive operation, such as Mandeville's idea of self-redirection of pride or Bayle's idea of ambition checking its own unruly variant, is more evident.¹⁷ Even Hobbes's classical case of pitting the fear of violent death against vainglory and ambition, is also suspected to be insufficient for founding a stable order.¹⁸ On the other hand, the final idea, that of a world governed by interest, is also clear enough. Since this picture presupposes interest to be a naturally dominant motive of human behavior, an interest-based social world is, by definition, a stable and predictable place. If one adds to this idea the belief of the harmony of interest or the invisible hand, peace and order would be further assured.¹⁹ If characterized in terms of these three ideas, thinkers of the Epicurean or Augustinian tradition largely hold the first idea, whereas those in the Stoic tradition tend to fall into the third viewpoint, especially in the case of Adam Smith.

Distinct from the first and third ideas, the second idea, that of using interest to counterbalance pernicious passions, namely, the central idea of the interest theory, is inherently ambiguous. The motive of interest involves the mixture of the interested passion and rational calculation. If we granted the heterogeneity of the passions, it would

¹⁷ Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*, chap. 4.

¹⁸ Berkowitz, *Virtue and Liberalism*, chap.1; Hampton, *Hobbes and Social Contract*, chap. 2–3.

¹⁹ Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*. 25–41.

be necessary to specify the interested passion involved in order to explain how interest can operate to countervail unfavorable passions. Mere mention of rational calculation cannot accomplish the job. However, if the interested passion involved is specified, more often than not, one will discover that it is uncertain whether this concrete passion can naturally cooperate with practical reason. Even if it is specified as the favorite passion of the interest theory, namely, wealth-seeking or money-making, questions still can be raised about its natural tendency. As indicated in the previous paragraph, this ambiguity and uncertainty can be removed only if the naturalness, dominance, and desirableness of the interested passion are all presupposed. However, this would only mean that we slip into the third stage, that of a world dominated by interest.

Put in this perspective, Hume's discussion of the interested passion actually exposes the inherent ambiguity of the doctrine of pitting interest against passion. As shown before, his discussion takes seriously the diversity and recalcitrance of the passions, thus bringing our attention to the problems with the standard doctrine of interest. In other words, he reveals that for the idea of interest to hold, the heterogeneity and recalcitrance of the passions must be downplayed. A world governed by interest must presuppose the possibility of the harmony between the interest of the individual and the interest of society, at least to a certain degree.

The Problems with the Model of Rational Subject

The idea of interest assumes a balanced mixture of interested passions and rational calculation. The previous section has shown that Hume's account of the passions

takes issue with the passionate element of this mixture. This section examines his problems with the rational element of the interest theory.

It is important to note that the emphasis of the idea of interest can shift between its passionate element and rational element. On the one hand, primary emphasis can be placed on specifying certain productive passions that can serve as the passionate element of rational self-interest, such as the love of gain or the desire for comfortable living. Considered this way, interest manifests itself mainly as a countervailing passion. It functions by motivating a certain sort of activity, such as money-making, that will counterbalance the desire for military glory or religious enthusiasm. On the other hand, the idea of interest can focus on reflective calculation and its action-guiding authority over whatever passion is involved. In this regard, familiar expressions, such as “enlightened self-interest,” “rational self-interest,” or “prudence” can all be taken as examples. As indicated in the previous sections, the idea of the countervailing passion tool hold earlier and the doctrine of interest was initially intimately connected with a certain set of passions. However, the idea of interest became more and more generalized and homogenized in the late eighteenth century and, increasingly, rational calculation became its center of gravity. Eventually the fact that passions have their own “natural tendency” has been downplayed, and diverse and heterogeneous passions have been reduced to a homogeneous interest through a logic of commensurability; accordingly, the focus of the idea of interest is decisively turned to the fashion in which various commensurable goods are pursued.²⁰

²⁰ Engelmann, *Imaging Interest*, introduction

The operation of practical reason, in so far as it concerns the typical idea of rational interest, involves two aspects. One aspect concerns instrumental reasoning, in the sense of finding the best means to a desired end. The other aspect is concerned with the ranking and choice of desired ends and cool-headedness required to stick with one's greater interests. These can be called the principle of instrumental reason and the principle of prudence, respectively.²¹

This operation of practical reason further leads to the conception of autonomous rational agency, which is largely peculiar to modern thought. This conception of self-determining agency can be traced back at least to Descartes, who opened up an independent world of subjectivity by distinguishing the substantial self from the physical nature. No longer was a human being perceived to be essentially situated in a supernatural order, or embedded in a human community; the autonomous self was even conceived to be distanced from his own physical and psychological nature, namely, his own body and sensible experience, thus becoming what Charles Taylor calls the "punctual self."²² A stronger version of this conception purports that the rational subject is self-determining and has a mastery over his own inclinations. He stands back from his experience and reflects on it from a detached point of view. Instead of being moved by

²¹ Christine M. Korsgaard, introduction to *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5–6; also see her two articles in this book: "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," 27–68, and "The Myth of Egoism," 69–99.

²² Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pt. 2, chap. 8.

the various desires and aversions he happens to have, he reflectively makes judgments and only acts upon them.²³

The motive of enlightened self-interest, insofar as it is distinct from occasional calculating behavior, presupposes such a rational agency. Although a person guided invariably by interest does not have to be as autonomous as, say, a Kantian subject, he has to be a rational actor of some sort.²⁴ He has no disinterested and whole-hearted commitments. He subjects his choice of action to constant calculation of relative advantage. Such an agent exercises a degree of self-command and self-control. When his greater interest conflicts with his immediate desire or passion, he steps back from present temptation and adheres to the long-term interest.

However, Hume's understanding of human nature radically calls into question the conception of autonomous rational agency. Hume famously indicates that our idea of the substantial self is groundless because we cannot find any of our sense perception to be its empirical source. According to him, the self, or mind, is to be understood in a nominalist fashion: it is "a bundle of perceptions," or a "succession of related ideas and impressions," or "a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance" (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 253).²⁵ However, this nominalist approach is not the only

²³ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Terry Pinkard, *Democratic Liberalism and Social Union* (Tempe: Temple University Press, 1987), chap. 2.

²⁴ This topic is certainly very complicated. For a brief but informed discussion of the relationship between self-interested prudence and self-conscious rational agency, see John Charvet, *The Idea of an Ethical Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pt.1.

²⁵ Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed. ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 238–69.

way in which Hume understands the mind or self. The workings of a set of original principles or propensities, such as the principles of association of ideas, are essential to his account of human nature. These principles or propensities are not the content of experience but the condition of the possibility of experience. It can be argued that Hume has an idea of the mind as a structured set of original principles or qualities, although he himself never explicitly says so.²⁶ Moreover, Hume's moral theory suggests a third notion of the self. According to Hume, our moral sentiment of appraisal is, by nature, directed toward the mental qualities of the agent. A person can be held accountable for their action only if the action proceeds from qualities that are "constant and inherent in his person and character" (T 2.2.3.4; SBN 348). Therefore, every person is essentially his qualities of character.²⁷

I will return to this topic in the fifth chapter. It is sufficient now to note that none of the above conceptions views the self as an independent noumenal entity that distances itself from passions and desires and exerts a power over them.²⁸ This rationalist idea of a detached self finds powerful expression in Descartes' mind, or Kant's transcendental ego. A weaker version of it also appears in the popular image of *Homo Economicus*. Even the possessive individual needs to be able to distance himself from his immediate desires and passions and adjust his behavior according to a calculation of interest.

²⁶ Robert Paul Wolff, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," *The Philosophical Review* 69, no.3 (July 1960): 289–310.

²⁷ Christine M. Korsgaard, "The General Point of View: Love and Moral Approval in Hume's Ethics," *Hume Studies* 25, no. 1&2 (1999): 3–41.

²⁸ Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology."

Hume's rejection of the conception of the rational subject is also reflected in his theory of will and reason. The conceptions of reason and free will are essential to the tradition of the rationalist model of human agency. Hume's account strips both ideas of their rationalist character. The idea of free will imagines that humans are able to transcend the influences of physical and psychological causes and initiate action. As indicated in the previous chapter, Hume unequivocally repudiates this idea and situates the will entirely in the context of causality. Instead of being an independent source of power, the will now is determined by antecedent factors and merely one part of the causal chain.²⁹

On the other hand, Hume divests reason of its practical power. He greatly reduced reason's range of operation, claiming that reason is essentially restricted to the working of the understanding, consisting of demonstrative reasoning and causal reasoning: "The operations of human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of ideas, and the inferring of matter of fact" (T 3.1.1.18; SBN 463). This theory introduces a sharp contrast between reason on the one hand, and passion, will, and action on the other. "Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood, truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact" (T 3.1.1.9; SBN458; original emphasis). Because "our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement" (T 3.1.1.9; SBN 458), it makes no sense to say that they are "reasonable" or "unreasonable," except in an indirect way.

²⁹ Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology"; John Bricke, "Hume on Liberty and Necessity," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Blackwell: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 201–16.

As a result, only passion can directly motivate action. Reason's role is no more than to provide factual information, identifying the object of a given desire and finding the efficient way to meet a desired end. As Hume writes, "Reason ...can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion" (T 3.1.1.12; SBN 459).

In Hume's view, the practical use of reason is restricted to instrumental reasoning. Practical reason is not capable of judging the value of human ends. It cannot dictate ends; it cannot even rank ends.³⁰ Some radical readings of Hume do not even consider him to be a genuine instrumentalist, because, by Hume's account, the means-end knowledge proceeding from instrumental reasoning has no normative or coercive force. The agent can engage in causal reasoning, but is not necessarily motivated by it.³¹ According to these readings, Hume denies any normative role to reason. For him, reason is not able to

³⁰ Hume notoriously remarks, "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter" (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416; original emphasis). If we remember that all references to "reason" here are to be understood in the light of Hume's special account of reason, this remark will not be as surprising as it at first appears to be.

³¹ See Jean Hampton, "Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason?" *Hume Studies* 21, no.1 (1995): 57–74; Christine Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27–68.

endorse or oppose a person's motivational states; the evaluation of action and end must appeal to feeling and sentiment.³²

To sum up, in Hume's picture of the human mind, there is no substantial self that rules over desires and passions and dictates belief and action. Reason is restricted to the operation of understanding and is essentially impotent in motivating people to action. As to the practical function of reason, at best, Hume holds an instrumentalist view of it; at worst, he is skeptical about practical reasoning per se. The human self consists of the totality of perceptions arising from the workings of the original principles and propensities of human nature.

The idea of interest refers to a balanced mixture of self-seeking and rationality. This idea can be understood as a naturalistic attempt to find the sources of social order within human nature. As indicated above, there has been a shift in the emphasis of this effort, from peaceful and productive passions to the guidance of rational calculation. Through this movement, the recalcitrance of the passions has been downplayed, and heterogeneous desires have been translated into commensurable goods suitable for aggregation and calculation. On the other hand, the prevailing Enlightenment rationalism lends an appearance of naturalness to the capacity for reflective calculation. If a human being is by nature a rational actor, the motive of enlightened self-interest will manifest itself as an essentially natural motive. Hume finds fault with this rationalist model of agency in almost every important aspect. For him, the apparent naturalness of the motive of enlightened self-interest is nothing but an illusion. Given his distinctive understanding of the passions and reason, it is difficult to see how he could imagine a stable mixture

³² Elijah Millgram, "Was Hume a Humean?" *Hume Studies* 21, no.1 (April 1995): 75.

between the interested passion and practical reasoning; it is even more difficult to see how he could allow that there exists the substantial self that exerts control over passions and constantly adjusts behavior according to a calculation of advantage.

The important point to appreciate is that *to say that the motive of enlightened self-interest has been formed is no less than to say that, to certain extent, a rational subject has been formed*. After all, every human being can from time to time act in a calculating way or worry about some interest. If the motive of enlightened self-interest is worth taking seriously as primary source of motivation, it should be more than merely a momentary feeling or an occasional occurrence. It must be a general motive or an enduring tendency, and must intrinsically involve a reflective and detached attitude. It must entail a picture in which agents constantly deliberate on the basis of interest calculation and accordingly regulate their conduct. Considering that here we are concerned with the motivational problem regarding conformity to general rules, which typically requires that the relevant motive be stable, constant, and enduring, this point is especially worth emphasizing.

One implication of these remarks is that it is better not to refer to Hume's understanding of the self-interest motive as enlightened self-interest or rational self-interest. The "self-interest" that Hume takes as the first motive in the establishment of artificial institutions is not merely limited in the temporal range of its operation; it is also different in substance from the enlightened self-interest (I will elaborate this point in the following chapter). As mentioned previously, Hume presents various terms for the original and uncultivated passions of self-love or self-interest, but he never uses a term like "reasonable self-love" or "rational self-interest" to describe the balanced mixture of

passion and rationality. This can be taken as an indication that, for Hume, the possibility of a stable mixture of passion and rationality is doubtful. The terms such as “redirected self-interest” and “corrected self-interest” are often used by commentators to refer to Hume’s notion of the motive of self-interest. But they are not Hume’s own usage, but created by Hume scholars to refer to what Hume famously describes as the interested passion’s “alteration of its direction ... upon the least reflection” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492). I will follow this practice just for brevity’s sake.

Weaknesses of Human Nature

The operation of practical reason, as supposed in the standard idea of rational self-interest, involves both instrumental reasoning and prudence (or reasonableness). Hume is well aware of the two requirements. In the second *Inquiry*, when he shows that it is in one’s interest to pursue virtues, Hume has this to say, “The sole trouble which she [virtue] demands, is that of *just calculation*, and a *steady preference of the greater happiness*” (EPM 9.15; SBN 279; emphasis added). In another passage, Hume stresses that people require both “sagacity” to perceive their interests and “strength of mind” to steadily adhere to their distant interests (EPM 4.1; SBN 205). These two requirements obviously match the instrumentalist principle and the principle of prudence respectively. When observing the common life of human beings, however, Hume finds no evidence for the model of autonomous rational agency. In his account of human nature, both requirements of practical reason are demanding for common people.

Hume admits that man is *at first* moved by self-interest to enter into the convention of property and justice. Many scholars interpret this as evidence for Hume's commitment to the interest theory. However, Hume's concession is quite limited. He divides the development of fundamental institutions such as the system of property into different historical stages and confines the role of the self-interest motive primarily to the first stage.

In the first stage, men live together in small communities, interacting with each other on a face-to-face basis. When the accumulation of external goods causes tension among people in this context, it is relatively simple to make an arrangement to remove this source of the conflict. In a "narrow and contracted" community, it is easy to perceive the benefit every person can achieve in establishing the arrangement and anticipate the destructive consequences each breach of this arrangement could result in. Therefore, it does not take much calculation for people to produce the first rules of justice and adhere to them.

However, the situation changes dramatically when society grows larger and more complex. The ineffectual nature of practical reason becomes a prominent problem.

But when society has become numerous, and has encreas'd to a tribe or nation, this interest is more remote; nor do men so readily perceive, that disorder and confusion follow upon every breach of these rules, as in a more narrow and contracted society. ...in our own actions we may frequently lose sight of that interest, which we have in maintaining order, and may follow a lesser and more present interest. (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499)

As society expands, the general interests that the rules of justice serve to satisfy become increasingly remote. It is more and more difficult for common people to adhere to these long-term interests. From time to time, people will be "blinded by passion, or byass'd by

any contrary temptation,” feeling their advantage to be better promoted by violating apparently pointless rules (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499). The boundaries of justice grow wider, yet the people’s view has not been enlarged proportionally. Hume remarks, “As violent passion hinders men from seeing distinctly the interest they have in an equitable behavior towards others; so it hinders them from seeing that equity itself, and gives them a remarkable partiality in their own favours” (T 3.2.7.7; SBN 538).

Moreover, a fundamental feature of the rules of justice greatly complicates the situation, “tho’ the rules of justice are establish’d merely by interest, their connexion with interest is somewhat singular” (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497). A single act of justice, considered apart, often makes little sense with respect to the immediate interests of either the society or individuals in it. For example, “when a man of merit, of a beneficial disposition, restores a great fortune to a miser, or a seditious bigot, he has acted justly and laudably, but the public is a real sufferer”; or consider “how a man may impoverish himself by a signal instance of integrity” (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497). If one tries to understand how a property order functions, it is important to consider the rules of justice as a system. As Hume puts it, “[’T]is only the concurrence of mankind, in a general scheme or system of action, which is advantageous” (T3.3.1.12; SBN 579). Furthermore, he states, “’Tis impossible to separate the good from the ill, Property must be stable, and must be fix’d by general rules.” But on the whole, disadvantages are considerably outweighed by advantages brought about by the whole practice of justice (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497).

Hume is deeply impressed by this fact. It is not an exaggeration to say that, for him, this feature is shared by almost all the artificial conventions he examines, including justice, political allegiance, civility, and sexual morality. Actually, Hume contends that

this feature constitutes a fundamental difference between natural virtues and artificial virtues, and that the indirectness or remoteness of our interests in observing general rules largely explains why the rules of justice have to be result of human artifice (T 3.3.1.12; SBN 579; T 3.2.2.19–22; SBN 496–98). While “a sense of interest” required for the first establishment of justice in a primitive society seems not to be beyond the reach of common people, a continued awareness of the remote interests accorded by the practice of justice in a “large and polish’d” society will be excessively demanding. This requirement of instrumental reasoning is obviously unrealistic as far as most people are concerned.

However, the problem with reasonableness — the other function of practical reason supposed in the standard idea of rational self-interest — is more fatal. Hume notices that “men so often act in contradiction to their *known* interest” because of “their violent propensity to prefer contiguous to remote” (T 3.2.7.3&6; SBN 535&537; emphasis added). Even if people have no difficulty in appreciating their distant interests when it comes to the issue of observing the rules of justice, there is still no guarantee that those rules will not be violated, because humans, by nature, tend to seek the satisfaction of present impulses at the cost of distant interests:

Men, ‘tis true, are always much inclin’d to prefer present interest to distant and remote; nor is it easy for them to resist the temptation of any advantage, that they may immediately enjoy, in apprehension of an evil, that lies at a distance from them. (T 3.2.8.1; SBN 539)

For Hume, this problem is much more serious than the difficulty with the capacity for instrumental reasoning. Although one often feels that certain acts of justice make little sense, the *general* interests he has in the upholding of justice is so fundamental that “‘tis

almost impossible for any one, who has had experience of society, to be mistaken in this particular.” An individual can lose sight of the remote interests, “[b]ut much more frequently, he is seduced from his great and important, but distant interests, by the allurements of present, though often very frivolous temptations” (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 37), even if he is well aware of these distant interests. Humans cannot be expected to be constantly prudent and reasonable.

This “natural infirmity of human nature” is taken by Hume as the typical situation that necessitates the establishment of government. According to Hume, “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. ... 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.” In his use of the phrase, particular persons, Hume is referring to civil magistrates. Of them he writes, “Who being indifferent persons to the greatest part of the state, have no interest, or but a remote one, in any act of injustice; and being satisfied with their present condition, and with their part in society, have an immediate interest in every execution of justice” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). Thus this incurable infirmity of human nature “becomes a remedy to itself” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536).

Political authority is certainly necessary for the proper functioning of any society. However, the trouble seems far from over. According to Hume, only civil magistrates are immediately motivated to maintain justice after the establishment of government. The immediate interests of common people remain distinct from their long-range interests in conforming to general rules. Under these circumstances, the “peculiar office” of magistrates will be “to point out the decrees of equity, to punish transgressors, to correct

fraud and violence, and to oblige men, however reluctant, to consult their own real and permanent interests” (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 38). In other words, peace and order is maintained primarily through coercion and punishment. What distinguishes the previous situation from the present one is simply that, now, a group of people, civil magistrates and their inferiors, appear on the scene, who are moved by their immediate interests to enforce law. Punishment will certainly reduce the disorder. Yet, the “violent propensity to prefer contiguous to remote” remains widely effective. As it does to the duty of justice, instant temptations could also override the duty of obedience. Hume is well aware of the possibility:

Our interest is always engaged on the side of obedience to magistracy; and there is noting but a great present advantage, that can lead us to rebellion, by making us over-look the remote interest, which we have in the preserving of peace and order in society. (T 3.2.8.7; SBN 545)

Furthermore, he admits, “not to mention, that the magistrate himself may often be negligent, or partial, or unjust in his administration” (E, “Of the Origin of Government,” 38).

This situation cannot be farther from what the interest theory advocates. According to interest theory, the motive of rational self-interest can serve to counterbalance aggressive and destructive passions, such as political ambition, militant glory, and religious enthusiasm. These passions are typically immediate and violent, whereas the motive of rational self-interest is by nature calm and far-sighted. The latter can overcome the former by means of constancy, stableness, and universality. However, if the human tendency to prefer present to remote is as powerful as Hume claims, the human race is denied the possibility of constant reasonableness, which is essential to the

constitution of interest. Hume's claim simply undermines the condition of the possibility of the imagined motive of rational self-interest. If, in his account of the origin of justice, there is still some ambiguity regarding his attitude toward the interest theory, now Hume leaves no doubt that he rejects this doctrine of the motive of rational self-interest. As Hume puts it, men "so often act in contradiction to their known interest" (T 3.2.7.3; SBN 535).

Calm Passions and Strength of Mind

Since Hume describes the human being largely as a creature of passion and desire, it is a natural move for him to turn to the passions to find an alternative to the motive of self-interest. This section examines this attempt. I will argue that the nature of this attempt is to replace reflective calculation with a set of unreflective and fixed tendencies to ensure steady adherence to long-term interest, and that this attempt leads to a general virtue, strength of mind, which is too demanding to be a hopeful solution.

The substitution of passion for reason finds a dramatic expression in Hume's theory. According to him, the operation of reason is essentially restricted to cognition, and reason's practical use is also cognitive in nature in that it can only provide means-end knowledge but has no normative role to play. Reason is essentially impotent and cannot produce or oppose desires and passions. To complete this argument, Hume assigns the practical role of the traditionally conceived reason to a class of passions. He claims that the traditionally conceived combat of reason and passion is actually a combat within the

passions, or to be more specific, it is a combat between a class of calm passions and a class of violent passions.

The Passions are usually thought to be typically agitating, violent and fierce, but Hume identifies a group of passions which “produce little emotion in the mind,” arguing that these “calm passions” are the motivating forces behind the actions that are commonly taken to be “reasonable.” Reason largely “exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion,” and the low emotional intensity of the calm passions allows them to be mistaken for reason (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417). The distinction between calm passions and violent passions is important in Hume’s thought in many ways, but what is directly relevant here is that the calm passions are supposed to serve as the substitute for practical reason. Being prudent will not be the self-conscious exercise of practical reason but the causal effect of a certain set of passions.³³

The nature of Hume’s calm passions is quite controversial. We have to clarify some confusion before moving forward to see how the calm passions are intended to take over the role of reflective calculation. A trap a commentator could walk into here is to place the emphasis on the “calmness” of the calm passions.³⁴ To be sure, two points are clear in Hume’s account of calm passions: calmness or tranquility is an eye-catching feature of the calm passions, and this lowness of emotional intensity is the reason for the confusion of the calm passions with reason. But calmness can not be taken as the defining

³³ Jerome Neu, *Emotion, Thought, and Therapy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 53–55; Terence Penelhum, *Hume* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), chap. 5.

³⁴ Pall Ardal is widely regarded as an authority on Hume’s theory of the passions. But it seems that she makes such a mistake. See *Passion and Value in Hume’s Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), chap. 5.

feature of the calm passions. As Hume admits, a calm passion can become emotionally intense in some cases, while a violent passion does not necessarily agitate under all circumstances. Most of the passions could be both violent and calm depending upon circumstances. It is just that the calm passions mostly cause little emotion in the mind, whereas violent passions typically produce disorder in the soul. Considered this way, the distinction by emotional intensity does not seem very illuminating.

For the calm passions to play the role previously misattributed to practical reason, they must have other characteristics than calmness. From Hume's list of the calm passions we can see what the substance should be:

Now 'tis certain, there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation. These desires are of two kinds; either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such. (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417)

Regarding this list three connected points are important. First, the calm passions Hume lists are all motivating passions. Not all passions are motivating,³⁵ but these calm passions must be capable of motivating in order to drive those actions traditionally misconceived to be propelled by reason. Second, the calm passions are mostly enduring. Motivating passions could be either lasting or fleeting. As Hume indicates, these passions

³⁵ At least going back to the middle ages, the passions were often divided into the concupiscible and the irascible. Roughly speaking, the irascible passions are reactive passions, such as love, hatred, pride, which are typically exciting and agitating, and most commonly recognized as passions; while the concupiscible passions are largely motivating passions or desires. Hume indicates that his four indirect passions, love, hatred, pride, and humility, are essentially reactive rather than motivating (T 2.2.6.1&6; SBN 366–68). See Jane L. McIntyre, "Hume's 'New and Extraordinary' Account of the Passions," in *Blackwell's Guide to Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 199–215; and "Hume's Passions: Direct and Indirect," *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 77. Also see James Fieser, "Hume's Classification of the Passions and Its Precursors," *Hume Studies* 18, no.1 (1992): 1–17.

are “tendencies,” and they are “certain instincts originally implanted in our natures” or “the general appetite ... and the aversion.” It is worth noting that by “tendencies,” “instinct” and “general appetite” Hume deliberately emphasizes the dispositional character of these passions. As dispositions, they are typically lasting and enduring, but do not have to be constantly operating.³⁶ Third, and most importantly, what these tendencies are concerned with are the most basic and fundamental goods in human life, such as physical safety (“love of life”), family life (“kindness to children”), treating others nicely when possible (“benevolence”), fighting back when harmed (“resentment”), and a persistent and general regard to one’s benefit. The term “such as” in the above-quoted passage indicates that this list is incomplete, but in light of the given examples it is safe to say that these “certain calm desires and tendencies” essentially aim at those long-range and fundamental interests in human life.

Put together, these are the defining features of the calm passions. They are motivating dispositions directed toward the fundamental interests in human life. In another passage, this nature of calm passions is made clearer:

Our affections, on a general prospect of their objects, form certain rules of conduct, and certain measures of preference of one above another: and these decisions, though really the result of our calm passions and propensities, (for what else can pronounce any object eligible or the contrary?) are yet said, by a natural abuse of terms, to be the determinations of pure *reason* and reflection. (EPM 6.15; SBN 239; original emphasis)

It is important to notice the way in which the calm passions serve the role traditionally attributed to reason. As the above passage indicated, the calm passions direct

³⁶ Hume’s original expression is “desires and tendencies.” But the term “desire” can refer either to enduring tendencies or to momentary impulses. Since Hume clearly says that the calm passions are either “certain instincts originally implanted in our natures” or “the general appetite... and the aversion,” he must intend the term “desire” to refer to enduring tendency.

people toward their remote interests not by “pure *reason* and reflection” (original emphasis) and self-conscious calculation of relative advantage; instead, they are the unreflective and fixed tendencies to be concerned with the long-term interests in human life. By Hume’s account, a key difference between reason and passion is that reason is about discovery of truth, whereas “[a] passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality” (T 2.3.3.5; SBN 415). The corollary of this difference for our current discussion is clear: a calm passion can adhere to certain remote interest only because of its implanted tendency. This is a typically dispositional approach to the problem of motivation. Hume is often criticized for his sharp separation of passion from reason. Moreover, if a passion is really a simple impression, as Hume defines it, he will also have difficulties in explaining the function of calm passions.³⁷ But we need not to worry ourselves about these problems. The point here is that Hume attempts to find a passionate alternative to the motive of reflective interest to move the common compliance. He imagines that a set of ingrained tendencies much more reliably attach people to their long-term interests.

A comparison with Hutcheson will further reveal this feature of Hume’s account. As some commentators noticed, Hume’s expression “the general appetite to good, and general aversion to evil, consider’d merely as such” in the passage just quoted suggests possible influences of Hutcheson.³⁸ Hutcheson writes in his *An Eassy on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, “There is a Distinction to be observed on this

³⁷ Ardal, *Passion and Value*, chap.1.

³⁸ Ardal, *Passion and Value*, 99.

Subject, between ‘the *calm Desire* of Good and Aversion to Evil, either selfish or public, as they appear to our *Reason or Reflection*; and the *particular Passions* towards Objects immediately presented to some Sense” (original emphasis).³⁹ For Hutcheson, the calm desire of good arises from “reason or reflection,” and by contrast, the particular passions such as “*Ambition, covetousness, Hunger, Lust, Revenge, Anger...* are found in many Tempers, where, thro’ want of Reflection, the *general calm* Desires are not found” (original emphasis).⁴⁰ In other words, Hutcheson’s calm desires of good are responsive to the agent’s practical reasoning about his situation.⁴¹ Hume’s calm passions clearly differ on this important matter. Considering that Hume very probably gets the idea of calm passions from Hutcheson, his divergence from Hutcheson on this issue is especially worth noticing.⁴²

³⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

⁴¹ Stephen Darwall, “Hutcheson on Practical Reason,” *Hume Studies* 23, no.1 (April 1997): 73–90.

⁴² Hume also tries to explain the nature of calm passions in terms of the idea of “a distant view.” Consider the following passages: (1) reason “is nothing but a general and clam passion, which takes a comprehensive and a distant view of its object, and actuates the will, without exciting any sensible emotion” (DP, 24). (2) Reason is “nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection” (T 3.3.1.18; SBN 583). (3) “When we consider any objects at a distance, all their minute distinctions vanish, and we always *give the preference to whatever is in itself preferable*, without considering its situation and circumstances. This gives rise to what in an improper sense we call *reason*, which is a principle, that is often contradictory to those propensities that display themselves upon the approach of the object” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536). This can be read as Hume’s another attempt to explain calm passions as a natural effect of certain objective situation. But it is not easy to see how Hume can derive normative content merely from the idea of “a distant view.” Tito Magri tries to develop this idea, but does not seem to succeed, see “Natural Obligation and Normative Motivation in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Hume Studies* 22, no. 2 (November 1996): 231.

Although the calm passions are by nature the fixed tendencies to adhere to the long-term interests, they are not immune to the disturbances of immediate desires and interests. The “incurable weakness of human nature” has the same effect here. There is no guarantee that the calm passions will prevail over the violent passions. The result of their conflict could go either way, “Men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them. Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interest and designs, “‘Tis not therefore the present uneasiness alone, which determines them” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418). Actually, if we pit the calm passions against the instant passions, the situation will more often than not be hopeless, because “our passions ... always plead in favor of whatever is near and contiguous” (T 3.2.7.2; SBN 535).

This brings us to Hume’s next move. The calm passions are a class of particular passions, each of which is a particular disposition to concern about a particular human good. Continuing the strategy of replacing reflective reason with fixed disposition, Hume goes to the higher level to find some more general disposition. He observes,

Both the *causes* and *effects* of these violent and calm passions are pretty variable, and depend, in a great measure, on the peculiar temper and disposition of every individual. (T 2.3.8.13; SBN 437)

And

In general we may observe, that both these principles [calm passions and violent passions] operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the general character or present disposition of the person. (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418)

So the solution must be a general tendency to prefer remote interests to instant passions, thus giving additional motivating power to all the calm tendencies. Put another way, it is

a dispositional version of the rational self. For Hume, this general tendency is “strength of mind,” a cardinal virtue. “What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418). “Strength of mind, which might enable them to resist the temptation of present ease or pleasure, and carry them forward in the search of more distant profit and enjoyment” (EPM 6.15; SBN 239).

Logically speaking, only this strength of mind plus the calm passions can serve as the complete substitute for reflective interest to enable us to seek our greater goods. By contrast, Hume calls the natural infirmity of human nature to prefer the small but immediate enjoyment as “narrowness of soul” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). Obviously, this narrowness of soul and strength of mind are both general human tendencies: while the former makes instant passions prevail, the latter ensures the triumph of the calm passions. Strength of mind does not refer to a natural state of any natural passion, but represents an improved and excellent state of the passions.

However, Hume cannot help but notice that this general virtue is not a reliable solution either: “[T]here is no man so constantly possess’d of this *virtue*, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418; emphasis added). How do we set out to cultivate this general virtue? Actually, Hutcheson conceives of a solution to ensure the prevalence of what he calls calm or general desires of human goods,

We obtain *Command* over the *particular Passions*, principally by strengthening the *general Desires* thro frequent Reflection, and making them *habitual*, so as to obtain Strength superior to the *particular Passions*. (original emphasis)⁴³

⁴³ Hutcheson, *The Passions and Affections*, 32.

Obviously, strengthening calm desires through “frequent reflection” sounds very intellectualistic and hopeless. Hume’s skepticism about practical use of reason would not allow him to commit this mistake. In discussing the incurable weakness of human nature to prefer instant passion to remote interest, Hume makes the following remarks,

This natural infirmity I may very much regret, and I may endeavour, by all possible means, to free my self from it. I may have recourse to study and reflexion within myself; to the advice of friends; to frequent meditation, and repeated resolution: And having experienc’d how ineffectual all these are, I may embrace with pleasure any other expedient, by which I may impose a restraint upon myself, and guard against this weakness.(T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536–37)

The point is that strength of mind is such a general virtue that it is hard to conceive of any specific method to cultivate it. Unlike Hutcheson, Hume distrusts intellectualistic approach. If strength of mind must be cultivated through self-conscious reflection, that would be another way to say that it is not a viable solution. Hume’s true attitude can be seen in the following passage,

Had every man sufficient *sagacity* to perceive, at all times, the strong interest which binds him to the observance of justice and equity, and, *strength of mind* sufficient to persevere in a steady adherence to a general and a distant interest, in opposition to the allurements of present pleasure and advantage; there had never, in that case, been any such thing as government or political society, but each man, following his natural liberty, had lived in entire peace and harmony with all others. (EPM 4.1; SBN 205; original emphasis)

Strength of mind can not be a virtue universally possessed by common people.

Eventually people have to enter into political society to secure peace and order. This can be taken as Hume’s final conclusion concerning the general virtue solution to the problem of motivation. The cultivating of a single cardinal virtue such as strength of mind seems more demanding than forming an enduring tendency of rational calculation.

Chapter Four

Shaping the Dispositional State of Artificial Virtues

The central issue of this chapter is the formation of the dispositional state of artificial virtues. Hume has denied the reliability of the motive of self-interest in motivating rule-following. A general virtue of prudence is not a practical alternative either. The problem of motivation cannot be solved in a general way. This helps reveal the significant feature of artificial virtues in Hume's theory: they are all distinctive virtues and context-specific.

Cultivating virtues is not an unusual topic. What is special about Hume's account is that he takes up this issue in the context of his naturalistic philosophy. To be more specific, according to Hume, people have two kinds of resources within human nature to work with when they set out to cultivate artificial virtues: the natural passion of self-interest in the broad sense, and the reactive sentiment of moral approval or disapproval. A naturalistic theory does not have to be reductionist. It can involve social interaction, historical evolution and even character cultivation. However, a tension between certain naturalistic assumptions and sociological and historical sensibility could arise. In Hume's moral and political theory, this tension does exist. The divergence of interpretation of Hume's account of the artificial virtues is largely due to this tension.

However, we do not have to choose between these two aspects. Dismissing one in favor of the other is not a productive way of reading Hume. It would be more fruitful to observe Hume's struggle with this tension without taking sides. How can he take

seriously naturalistic assumptions while still engaging in a social and historical way of thinking? How do his naturalistic assumptions affect the range of his historical imagination? How does his sense of historical concreteness limit his commitment to naturalistic beliefs? The point I have touched upon before and will elaborate upon in this chapter is that Hume's understanding of the motive of self-interest is quite context-relative and history-sensitive and therefore significantly different from the standard idea of enlightened self-interest as understood in today's social science. It is based on this understanding that this chapter will stress the role of "redirected interest" in the formation of the dispositional state of artificial virtues.¹ I will focus on two ways this "redirected interest" is involved in the formative process of artificial virtues: the first is its gradual transition into a fixed attachment to a particular interest independent of constant interest calculation; the second is its contribution to the habituation of rule-following behavior. The discussion shows how Hume's account of artificial virtues involves a naturalistic notion of human nature and yet still is a theory of character transformation.

¹ As indicated in the previous chapter, the terms "redirected self-interest," "redirected interest" or "corrected self-interest" are often used by Hume scholars to refer to Hume's understanding of the self-interest motive. These terms are all related to Hume's famous claim in the *Treatise*, "There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction" (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492). However, these terms are not of Hume's own making, but created by Hume scholars. In the following discussion, I will consistently use these terms to remind the difference between Hume's understanding of the self-interest motive and the standard conception of rational self-interest in today's social sciences, understood as involving autonomous rational agency and reflective calculation.

Hume's Conception of Virtue

Before turning to Hume's theory of the cultivation of virtues, a brief review of his conception of virtue is required. Hume never explicitly defines the conception "virtue."² Although his special understanding of the mind and the self suggests a tension with the dispositional approach, Hume clearly understands virtue as a dispositional state of mind.³ He variously calls this dispositional state as "disposition," "quality," "tendency," "the principle of mind," and "character."⁴ In his words, virtues are "durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character" (T 3.3.1.4; SBN 575). Or virtue is a quality of an individual that is "constant and inherent in his person and character" (T 2.2.3.4; SBN 348). This dispositional understanding finds the clearest expression in the following passage:

Where a person is possess'd of a character, that in its natural tendency is beneficial to society, we esteem him virtuous, and are delighted with the view of his character, even tho' particular accidents prevent its operation. ... We know, that an alteration of fortune may render the benevolent disposition entirely

² Hume often uses the term "virtue" in a general sense to refer to moral worth or merit. For instance, Part 1 of Book 3 of the *Treatise* is titled as "Of Virtue and Vice in General." Here "virtue and vice" simply refers to the general moral distinction of good and evil, or right and wrong. The same can be said about Hume's expression "the virtue of the action," which means the moral worth or merit of the action. But this general sense of the term "virtue" is not our current concern.

³ See A. E. Pitson, *Hume's Philosophy of the Self* (London: Routledge, 2002), 88–91; Jane L. McIntyre, "Character: A Humean Account," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no.2 (April 1990): 193–206.

⁴ As to the term "character," Maria Merritt indicates, "This is 'character' in Hume's frequent, now obsolete, sense of that term, meaning some single, specific personal quality – roughly what we would now mean by 'character trait'". See her "Virtue Ethics and the Social Psychology of Character" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999), 178. Also see Pitson, *Hume's Philosophy of the Self*, 86.

impotent; and therefore we separate, as much as possible, the fortune from the disposition. (T 3.3.1.19 & 21; SBN 584–85)

One can look at a disposition from different angles. Hume typically considers virtues in relation to their functioning as motives, and accordingly, in relation to the actions motivated by them. “Actions are, indeed, better indications of a character than words, or even wishes and sentiments” (T 3.3.1.5; SBN 575). More specifically, Hume understands a virtue primarily as a motive that causes actions that tend to produce certain consequences affecting the welfare of people.

However, Hume’s naturalistic philosophy gives rise to a special feature of his conception of virtue. Hume rejects metaphysical or theological views on morality, thus not being able to follow, say, Aristotle to adopt a teleological understanding of virtue. He locates the source of moral distinction in the reactive sentiments of approval or disapproval toward the motives and mental qualities of the agent. This sentimental theory of moral distinction implies that Hume’s conception of virtue involves two aspects. One is a dispositional state of character; the other is a peculiar moral sentiment of approval or disapproval toward that dispositional state. What makes the disposition or trait a virtuous disposition is its being approval by the reactive sentiment.⁵

It seems that these two aspects can be separated from each other. On the one hand, there is an agent who possesses dispositions or traits; on the other hand, there is “a

⁵ A detailed examination of Hume’s sentimental theory of moral judgment is beyond this discussion. Hume’s sentimental theory of morality may strike one as a subjectivist understanding of moral judgment. However, considering that the moral sentiment is not arbitrary reaction but arises merely in response to the state of affairs that the relevant disposition typically brings about, it is certainly possible to interpret Hume’s sentimentalism in some other ways. See, for example, David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

judicious spectator” whose sentiment of appraisal is evoked toward the agent’s traits (T 3.3.1.14; SBN 581).⁶ One can focus on traits of character and assess their merit simply in terms of their usefulness without any reference to moral sentiment, as a utilitarian would do;⁷ one can also embrace the sentimental theory of moral judgment but dismiss the account of character traits, as many contemporary scholars have done. Some theorists even explicitly separate Hume’s virtue theory from his sentimental theory of morality, arguing that the moral sentiment does not have to take quality of character as its object but can directly react to action and assess its moral merit.⁸

According to Hume, however, it is a natural feature of the moral sentiment of appraisal that its proper object is quality of character. This is simply an original fact of human nature, which constitutes the starting point for our moral thinking. He observes:

‘Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. (T 3.2.1.2; SBN 477)

We are never to consider any single action in our enquiries concerning the origin of morals; but only the quality or character from which the action

⁶ One certainly can have a reactive feeling of appraisal toward one’s own character traits. But as this self-related feeling can easily be distorted by one’s own interests or prejudices, Hume claims that a reactive sentiment can be taken as moral sentiment “only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest” (T 3.1.2.4; SBN 472), or put another way, only if the sentiment arises from “a general point of view” (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 582). From this consideration Hume goes to the claim that the moral sentiment must typically come from “a judicious spectator.” However, Hume is notoriously unclear on this notion of generality. For some representative discussion of this issue, see Rachel Cohon, “The Common Point of View in Hume’s Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, no.4 (December 1997): 827–50; Korsgaard, “General point of view.”

⁷ Stephen Darwall, “Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 58–82.

⁸ Snare, *Morals, Motivation, and Convention*, pt. 2, chap. 5–6.

proceeded. These alone are durable enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person. (T 3.3.1.5; SBN 575)

In Hume's theory this natural feature of moral sentiment forges a tight connection between character traits and moral sentiments. For him, this is a fundamental reason why morality lies in virtue. Moreover, an important implication of this feature is that a dispositional state must be prior in time to the moral sentiment directed toward it. Otherwise there would be nothing to stimulate the moral sentiment in the first place. The moral sentiment cannot simply take action as the object of moral appraisal; it will necessarily suppose the action to arise from some motive and take that motive as its object. Action alone has no merit. The moral worth of action derives only from its inner motive. With these claims, Hume establishes a strong version of virtue theory in the sense that it virtually reduces all sorts of moral judgments to the judgment about virtue.

If all virtues are natural virtues as defined by Hume, these claims would cause no trouble. By his account, a natural virtue has its root in some natural passion and therefore does not depend on human artifice for its existence. A natural virtue causes action and brings about its typical results, which in turn stimulates moral reactive sentiment of approval or disapproval toward the virtue itself. However, when it comes to artificial virtues, difficulties come up. Artificial virtues do not have a natural existence. They arise only through convention, and conventions, rules and rule-following acts must come first. Hume's claim is "[T]he sense of justice and injustice is not deriv'd from nature, but arises artificially, tho' necessarily from education, and human convention" (T 3.2.1.17; SBN 483). This situation can bring out many questions: What can be the object of the reactive moral sentiment in the very beginning? What constitutes the psychological state of

artificial virtues? How can they be formed? What a role does the moral sentiment play in the cultivation of artificial virtues? These questions are all related to the discussion in this chapter.

The Ambiguity in Hume's Account of Artificial Virtues

Regarding the problem of motivation in a liberal order, Hume needs to address two issues. Firstly, he needs to dispel the illusion that motivation is not a serious problem for liberalism. Secondly, he needs to provide a constructive account of the formation of the required motivations on the basis of the minimalist assumptions of his naturalistic philosophy. Hume's rejection of the doctrine of promise and his skepticism about the reliability of the motive of self-interest demonstrate the gravity of the situation. Moreover, Hume's notion of the artificiality of liberal virtues further strengthens the argument. As we have seen, Hume formulates this problem of motivation in terms of the opposition between "nature" and "artifice." Within the context of his naturalistic philosophy, this stress on artificiality takes on a special significance. The artificiality of the class of artificial virtues is highlighted in contrast to the presumed naturalness of other virtues. The motives of artificial virtues are described as "naturally unintelligible."

However, when it comes to the second goal, explaining the formation of the artificial virtues, great confusion arises. Hume's account provides relatively few remarks explicitly referring to the cultivation of the disposition state of the artificial virtues. On the other hand, he offers a great deal of discussion regarding what he calls as the "interested obligation" (or the "natural obligation") and the "moral obligation." These

two “obligations” correspond to the two questions that Hume considers fundamental in understanding artificial rules and conventions. The questions are: (1) how do the rules and conventions come about, and (2) how do they get to be morally approved? Thus, Hume always employs a two-step approach when discussing various artificial virtues: the first step explains how the relevant convention is established and maintained through the interaction of individuals driven by “redirected self-interest”; the second step explains how the moral sentiment of approval is evoked toward the emerging convention. The former process gives rise to the “interested obligation” concerning the convention, while the latter process results in the “moral obligation” concerning the convention.

In the beginning of his account of artificial virtues in the *Treatise*, Hume gives the impression that he will explain the formation of artificial virtues. However, neither the “interested obligation” nor the “moral obligation” seems to be the psychological state of artificial virtues. The conception of “interested obligation” is related to the motivational role of “redirected interest.” The conception of “moral obligation” arises out of Hume’s sentimental theory of morality and involves the moral sentiment of appraisal.

Controversies among commentators exist over the exact nature of these two “obligations.” Some scholar holds that the term “obligation” in Hume’s theory refers to “determining motive,”⁹ but no one thinks that either of these obligations can be simply

⁹ Schneewind remarks, “Hume talks of obligation from time to time, He never takes it to involve the will of another who directs and sanctions our actions, as the natural lawyers do. Rather, like Shaftesbury, he takes it to refer only to a determining motive. Thus he speaks of interest as ‘the natural obligation to justice,’ and when he asks what the moral obligation is, he is asking what role the moral feelings have in moving us to be just.” See J.B.Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 371. While this remark does not do justice to the complexity of Hume’s use of the term “obligation,” Schneewind is right in indicating that Hume has naturalized this conception, and that this change can be traced back to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.

equated with the very psychological state of artificial virtues. On the one hand, the psychological state of a self-interested motive seems clearly different from the virtuous motive, since the reflective calculation, which is characteristic of enlightened self-interest, prevents disinterested commitment, which is essential to the virtues of character. On the other hand, the sentiments of moral approval or disapproval are reactive passions and are distinct from motivating passions, such as self-love and benevolence. Hume never explicitly explains whether the sentiment of moral approval or disapproval is capable of motivating. Even if those sentiments can motivate people to action, the resulting motivating force is probably quite limited.¹⁰

In one sense, Hume's preoccupation with these two "obligations" is perfectly understandable. He highlights the artificiality of the class of virtues directly related to liberal institutions. As he repeatedly stresses, the related virtues, such as justice, fidelity, and allegiance, are not naturally intelligible to humans. These virtues make sense only relative to certain conventions. They must be cultivated through those conventions. The task he sets for himself is to account for the formation of the artificial virtues in natural terms. Within the bounds of Hume's naturalistic philosophy, the two most salient classes of natural passions in human nature appear to be the moral sentiment and the passion of self-love in the broad sense. His explanation starts with these natural passions and moves forward to examine what, under certain social and historical circumstances, might arise from the actions of individuals affected by these passions. In the case of the virtue of justice, for example, self-interest serves as the original motive to the establishment of

¹⁰ Charlotte Brown, "Is Hume an Internalist?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26, no.1 (January 1988): 69–87.

conventions governing property, while a person's natural reactive feeling becomes the source of moral appraisal. Out of these arise the two "obligations to justice": humans are under the "obligation of interest" to perform acts of justice; and hold a moral feeling of approbation or disapprobation towards justice or injustice. However, neither self-love nor moral evaluative sentiment seems to be the very psychological state of the artificial virtues. A gap exists between these natural passions and artificially formed virtues. The problem remains unanswered: if Hume has to appeal to the artificial virtues to move people to compliance, what exactly constitutes the psychological state of these virtues? How are they formed? What a role does the passion of self-love have in the formation of the artificial virtues? In what relationship do moral sentiments stand to the growth of the artificial virtues?

Here is a typical manifestation of the tension between Hume's naturalistic starting point and artificial transformation. He is committed to the naturalistic assumptions of his philosophy, but he is equally serious about the artificiality of the class of virtues directly allied to liberal institutions. He knows well that he cannot, like the proponents of early modern contractarianism, appeal to constructive rationality and self-determining will to bridge this gap. He must account for the artificial virtues in fully natural terms without relying on metaphysical or theological posits. Under such circumstances, the only reasonable option is to turn to the social and historical aspects of human life, and he does take that direction. The ambiguity with Hume's account of artificial virtues is largely related to the tension between naturalistic assumptions and social and historical transformation. The complex relationship between interest theory and virtue theory is just one example of this larger tension.

In brief, two things are now clear: first, artificial virtues are required to sustain liberal institutions; and second, Hume does not provide an unequivocal account regarding the formation of these artificial virtues, and therefore, the exact psychological content of these virtues remains unclear. One has to collect his scattered remarks and uncover this dimension of his theory.

Given this ambiguity, many commentators doubt whether Hume seriously intends the artificial virtues to be understood as dispositions. They suspect that for Hume the motive that leads people to follow rules can be explained by the operation of self-love and moral sentiment. Guided by this understanding, they developed various interpretations.¹¹ The most common interpretation among them is the one we have seen in the introductory chapter, one that tends to exclude the consideration of any virtuous or moral motivation and argues that for Hume enlightened self-interest is the dominant motivation of compliance while the moral sentiment is only a reactive attitude of “approving such motivated acts.”¹² The second line of interpretation gives primacy to the moral sentiment, claiming that, although the sentiment of moral approval cannot *directly* motivate action, it can *indirectly* do so by shaping the moral opinion of society and thereby exerting pressure on individuals. Variants of this interpretation exist, depending upon the different ways in which indirect pressure is formed and imposed. For example, one variant holds that moral opinion in society exerts an influence on the individual’s

¹¹ The ambiguity of Hume’s own account is certainly a reason for the divergence of interpretation over this matter, but commentators’ choices also have a great deal to do with the prevailing views in contemporary theory regarding how morality is to be conceived. I will briefly elaborate on this issue in the section 4 of this chapter.

¹² Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 242.

non-moral passions and desires, such as a concern for one's reputation, thus generating a motivation of compliance.¹³ According to another variant, moral opinion in society can cause uneasy feelings in humans because they cannot feel the virtuous motivating impulse in the mind as common opinion claims they should. Therefore, they deliberately perform the required acts under internalized pressure.¹⁴ The interpretations mentioned above all insist on understanding Hume in terms of his naturalistic presuppositions. However, Stephen Darwall questions this common position. According to his interpretation, Hume has to go beyond his naturalistic philosophy to account for the disinterested motive to justice, and there are indications that Hume does begin to flirt with the conception of autonomous rational agency and consider the deliberate commitment to the observance of rules as obligatory and motivating.¹⁵

Although all above-mentioned interpretations choose not to understand Hume's artificial virtues as dispositions, there are other commentators who insist that Hume's artificial virtues are motivating dispositions. But this group of commentators typically appeals to the moral sentiment rather than the passion of self-love to explain the formation of the dispositional state of the artificial virtues. They claim that the moral sentiments of approbation toward justice and disapprobation toward injustice can directly motivate the person with these feelings to conform to rules. Although the motivating

¹³ Jane L. McIntyre, "Strength of Mind: Prospects and Problems for a Humean Account," *Synthese* 152, no.3 (October 2006): 393–401.

¹⁴ Haakonssen, *Hume's Political Theory*, 341–80; Haakonssen, *Science of a Legislator*, chap. 2; David Gauthier, "Artificial Virtues and the Sensible Knave," *Hume Studies* 18, no.2 (November 1992): 401–27.

¹⁵ Stephen Darwall, "Motive and Obligation in Hume's Ethics," *Noûs* 27, no.4 (December 1993): 415–48; Darwall, *British Moralists and Internal 'ought,'* chap. 10.

power of moral sentiment, in and of itself, might be limited, it can be reinforced by many other factors and eventually develop into the required virtuous motive.¹⁶

There remains another option, namely, that the virtuous dispositions somehow evolve from the operation of a self-interested motive. Probably because of the apparent opposition between self-interested calculation and disinterested morality, this option is rarely mentioned, much less pursued by commentators. David Gauthier very probably makes the first reference to this option in the secondary literature, even if he himself does not take it; Don Garrett might be the only scholar who clearly claims this position in the secondary literature.¹⁷ In one short passage, Gauthier indicates that it is an arguable possibility that the “redirected self-interest,” as Hume understands it, has actually been transformed into a virtue.¹⁸ However, Gauthier does not answer the key question: how can a motive resulting from “redirected self-interest” distances itself from calculating advantage and steadily adhere to rules? Don Garrett makes an important distinction in response to this question, claiming that while enlightened self-interest involves the calculation of advantage, it can result in a firm virtuous disposition to follow general rules.¹⁹ But he does not explain how this could happen.

¹⁶ Rachel Cohon, “Hume’s Difficulty with the Virtue of Honesty,” *Hume Studies* 23, no.1 (1997): 91–112; David Fate Norton, “The Foundations of Morality in Hume’s *Treatise*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed. ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 270–310.

¹⁷ Gauthier, “Artificial Virtue”; Don Garrett, “The First Motive to Justice: Hume’s Circle Argument Squared,” in *Hume Studies* 33, no.2 (2007): 257–88.

¹⁸ Gauthier, “Artificial Virtue.”

¹⁹ Garrett, “First Motive to Justice.”

Considering the assumptions of Hume's philosophy, it seems natural to connect the formation of the artificial virtues with the operation of a self-interested motive. As previously indicated, Hume sets out to account for virtues in natural terms. Social arrangements or conventions among strangers and non-intimates have to be established by human artifice and through long-term evolution. Their formation has to be initiated and driven by certain natural passions, particularly the passions of self-interest. "Redirected self-interest" is the original motive in the establishment of conventions, and it is by convention that artificial virtues have been formed. Seen this way, it is quite logical to think that "redirected self-interest" plays a major role in the formation of the virtuous disposition of the artificial virtues.

Before giving his account of artificial virtues, Hume established the fundamental principles of his moral theory, which I summarized in the previous section. Among all the interpretations previously discussed, the last option, that of stressing the role of the self-interest motive in the formation of the artificial virtues, is the only one that can be compatible with all these principles. It understands Hume's artificial virtues as mental dispositions; it respects the view that the moral worth of action derives from its inner motive; and it has no problem with the principle that the disposition of character is the natural object of the moral sentiment. By contrast, most of the other interpretations deny that the artificial virtues are actually virtuous qualities of character. As to those who regard Hume's artificial virtues as dispositions but think that these dispositions result from moral sentiment, a problem can arise as to what the proper object of moral sentiment is before the formation of those virtuous dispositions.

However, neither Gauthier nor Garrett pursues their views mentioned above. How enlightened self-interest can result in a virtuous disposition is not explained.²⁰ This is not accidental. As I will show below, this failure has much to do with the fact that neither of them has been aware of the important ambiguity that exists with regard to the understanding of the motive of self-interest. Both scholars simply take this conception to be self-evident and, therefore, it is difficult for them to account for the relationship between the self-interest motive and the resulting disposition to adhere to rules.

I will pursue this view in the remaining part of this chapter and explain the process by which Hume's artificial virtues are causally connected to "redirected self-interest". Two points lie at the heart of this interpretation: the first concerns a distinction between Hume's conception of "redirected self-interest" and the standard notion of enlightened self-interest; the second concerns the fundamental role that habituation serves in the formation of the dispositions of artificial virtues.

"A Sense of Interest"

In the beginning of his account of artificial virtues in the *Treatise*, Hume holds that self-love cannot be a natural motive to acts of justice:

[S]elf-love, when it acts at its liberty, instead of engaging us to honest actions, is the source of all injustice and violence; nor can a man ever correct those vices, without correcting and restraining the natural movements of that appetite. (T 3.2.1.10; SBN 480)

²⁰ Gauthier, "Artificial Virtue"; Garrett, "First Motive to Justice."

But as shown in the previous chapter, Hume quickly changes his tone when entering into the discussion of artificial institutions. He declares, “*Self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice*” (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499; original emphasis). According to him, the passion of interest serves this role of motivation “by an alteration of its direction,” and that “this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492).

It is quite common that commentators summarize Hume account of self-interest by using the term “enlightened self-interest” or “rational self-interest.” For example, David Fate Norton writes, “On Hume’s account, the unreflective self-interest that characterizes humanity’s ‘wild uncultivated state’ ... was gradually restrained and redirected. ... [I]ndividual humans have gained an effective motive, *enlightened* self-interest, to establish the conventions of justice, a motive that the uncultivated members of our species lacked” (original emphasis).²¹ Norton does not seem to feel it necessary to explain what he means by “enlightened self-interest.” It is not far-fetched to say that he simply follows the standard understanding of this idea in the contemporary thought.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the idea of enlightened self-interest, or rational self-interest, as understood in contemporary thought, is inherently connected with a model of rational man. This model presents a picture of an autonomous rational subject that always keeps a reflective distance from his desires and feelings and constantly adjusts his behavior according to a calculation of relative advantage. Therefore, to gain a motive of enlightened self-interest (as Norton states) crucially involves acquiring a general capacity for reflectively adjusting one’s behavior in terms of interest calculation.

²¹ Norton, “Morality in Hume’s *Treatise*,” 297.

On the other hand, as we have seen before, Hume has serious problems with the idea of autonomous rational agency, thus unable to imagine that the reflective and clear-headed calculation of advantage can become an enduring state of mind. When Hume thinks of “redirected self-interest,” he cannot equate it with enlightened self-interest.

As just shown in the previous section, the prevailing tendency in Hume scholarship is to underestimate the role of the motive of self-interest in the formation of the artificial virtues. I will argue that a fundamental reason for this tendency is precisely the universal assimilation of “redirected self-interest” in Hume’s text into the standard idea of enlightened self-interest. According to this misreading of Hume, one will certainly think that a discontinuity exists between “redirected self-interest” and the shaping of virtuous dispositions. Although commentators may not explicitly subscribe to this problematic interpretation of Hume’s notion of self-interest, there are clear indications that most of them lean toward this direction. This misreading of Hume clearly shows itself when some commentators directly refute the suggestion that the operation of “redirected self-interest” could result in the virtue of justice. For example, Stephen Darwall claims that to think that for Hume self-interest could lead to artificial virtue is to “take Hume to hold that suitably enlightened self-interest, or strength of mind, is the motivational state distinctive of the just person,” and to take the just person as “a person appropriately mindful of justice’s long-term benefits, and able to weigh them properly with ‘lesser and more present interests’ (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499), [who] will always have an adequate motive of interest to comply with its rules.” Darwall clearly equates Hume’s notion of self-interest with enlightened self-interest. Based on this misreading of Hume, Darwall naturally rejects the suggestion of connecting “redirected interest” with artificial

virtues since this is to say that “the motive of just acts is simply enlightened self-love.”

Nor surprisingly, Darwall also criticizes that this view of Hume requires the person to be “fully-informed, strong-minded,” which could be considered overly demanding.²² A similar criticism comes from Rachel Cohon:

If “redirected self-interest” is still self-interest (or redirected greed is still greed), and it moves us to conform to the rules of property in order to preserve society, then it seems that it will fail us in those cases where we realize that such conformity does not in fact help to preserve society (the seditious bigot), or where we see that violation would not in the least endanger society (the secret loan in the *Treatise* and the sensible knave). ... Thus, “redirected interest” does not yield the kind of reliable conformity to the rules of property that we would expect of an honest person.²³

Obviously Cohon’s comment is also based on identifying Hume’s “redirected self-interest” with the general tendency of deliberation and calculation.

How does Hume’s explanation of “redirected self-interest” differ from the standard idea of rational self-interest? As previously noted, given Hume’s theory of reason and passion, he cannot think that human beings can commonly be understood in terms of the model of the rational actor. In his account of the establishment of institutions and virtues, Hume always minimizes the role of deliberative reason. When describing how the original passion of self-interest is redirected by rational calculation, Hume famously writes, “This alteration must necessarily take place *upon the least reflection*” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492; emphasis added). This assertion is repeated in the following passage:

[T]his interest, which all men have in the upholding of society, and the observation of the rules of justice, is great, so is it palpable and evident, even to the most rude and uncultivated of human race; and ‘tis almost impossible for any

²² Darwall, “Motive and Obligation.”

²³ Cohon, “Hume’s Difficulty with Honesty,” 105.

one, who has had experience of society, to be mistaken in this particular. (T 3.2.7.1; SBN 534)

A similar remark is found in Hume's discussion of the origin of the practice of promise:

Nor is that knowledge, which is requisite to make mankind sensible of this interest in the *institution* and *observance* of promises, to be esteem'd superior to the capacity of human nature, however savage and uncultivated. There needs but a very little practice of the world, to make us perceive all these consequences and advantages. (T 3.2.5.11; SBN 522; original emphasis)

Moreover, as we have seen in the second chapter of this dissertation, Hume's account of the shaping of allegiance sees a lesser role for rational reflection. Much higher importance is bestowed to unconscious growth and habit.

Along with the minimizing of the role of rational autonomy and calculation, Hume gives great prominence to the role of the immediate context in the alteration of the direction of the natural passion of self-interest. His account of property and justice offers a good example. Conventions of property originate typically in primitive and small societies. In this face-to-face context, the advantage of a property order is evident, while each violation of the rules is easy to find and can greatly diminish the motivations of others to cooperate (T 3.2.7.3; SBN 535). As Hume writes, people "readily perceive ... that disorder and confusion follow upon every breach of these rules ... in a more narrow and contracted society" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499). This is largely due to social transparency and mutual restraint characteristic of a primitive society. The communal context makes it difficult for the members to neglect the necessity of each and every act of justice. Within this context, each act of justice is not so much a deliberative choice based on a calculation of advantage as a spontaneous reaction to others' rule-following behavior. Both in the *Treatise* and in the second *Inquiry*, Hume uses the example of boat pulling to

illustrate the spontaneous feature of interaction between individuals. He writes, “Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho’ they have never given promises to each other” (T 3.2.2.10; SBN 490). Here what sustains the coordination of the performances between the two people is more of the situation than a clearheaded calculation and self-discipline.

On its surface, Hume’s claims, that “self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice” (T3.2.2.24; SBN 499), and that people “are at first mov’d only by a regard to interest” to institute and observe the rules of justice (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499), may appear to refer to the standard idea of rational self-interest. Put in context, however, a subtle but fundamental difference emerges. When making above remarks, Hume might have in mind something similar to a calculation of advantage. However, the interest calculation as conceived by Hume does not involve a stable and enduring tendency of reflection and calculation; rather, he is speaking of a particular occurrence in a particular context. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Hume repudiates the conception of the command of practical reason over the agitating passions, nor does he allow the possibility of a constant tendency of reflective calculation. The redirection of the original passion of self-interest is not a deliberative choice made by an autonomous rational agent and sustained by his detached rationality, but occurs as a situational reaction and maintained through social transparency and mutual restraint that is typical of the primitive, small society.

The most important point to appreciate is that the resulting “redirected self-interest” is not a general motive that can be maintained outside of its original context. It is a specific motive, and the interest that is involved in that “regard to interest” is a

distinctive interest. The efficacy of this motive in maintaining the rules of justice highly depends upon that particular context. Only a contextually sensitive reading can reveal the genuine nature of this account of the self-interest motive. However, as the earlier quotations from Norton, Darwall and Rohon show, commentators often understand the “redirected self-interest” as a new general motive, or to be more specific, as a newly acquired general capacity for rational self-interest or general tendency of rational calculation, which can operate independently of its original context. That Hume’s understanding of “redirected self-interest” is and must be context-sensitive has been commonly neglected in the secondary literature. In Hume’s discussion there is no indication that a general tendency toward rational calculation has been formed or reinforced during this process. Neither is there any indication that the redirection of self-interest involves the formation or enhancement of autonomous rational agency. It is not accidental that Hume never uses the terms similar to “reasonable self-love” or “enlightened self-interest” or “rational self-interest,” all of which suggest a motivational state characterized by the stable mixture of self-seeking and rational calculation.

This brings us to the central point I wish to make in this section, that is, *the redirection of the natural passion of self-interest as described in Hume’s text does not produce a general capacity for enlightened self-interest, but gives rise to an enduring and distinctive sense of a particular long-term interest.* As the result of the redirection of the original passion of self-interest, “a sense of interest,” as Hume puts it, is formed. It is a distinctive sense of a particular long-term interest. The interest concerned differs depending on which liberal conventions or institutions one has in mind. It can be the particular interest people have in maintaining the rules of property, or in maintaining the

rules of politeness, or in supporting a government, etc. The redirection of the original passion of self-interest is a long-time process. Hume notes that, a convention “arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it” (T 3.2.2.10; SBN 490). The redirection of the natural passion of self-interest is part of this “slow progression.” This resulting “redirected self-interest,” or “a sense of interest” is at first inseparable from the minimal interest calculation that is provoked and sustained by social transparency and mutual restraint in this small society. Over time, that distinctive sense of the long-term interest has acquired an enduring existence, without involving even “the least reflection.” It has become a fixed awareness.

It will be helpful to take a close look at the specific way in which Hume speaks of this sense of interest. Hume treats the issue of the self-interest motive typically in relation to the establishment of conventions of property, and his typical way of talking about convention is to equate it with “a sense of interest”:

This convention [of property]... is only a general *sense of common interest*; which sense all the members of the society express to one another, and which *induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules*. (T 3.2.2.10; SBN 490; emphasis added)

[J]ustice establishes itself by a kind of convention or agreement; that is, by a *sense of interest*, suppos'd to be common to all. (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 498; emphasis added)

This way of talking also appears in the second *Inquiry*:

[J]ustice arises from Human Conventions, ... if by convention be meant a *sense of common interest*; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellow, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility; it must be owned, that, in this sense, justice arises from human conventions. (EPM app.3.7; SBN 306; emphasis added)

Note that Hume's typical expression is "a sense of interest" and that, in the passages quoted above, the term "interest" refers to the specific interest in maintaining justice. Hume's emphasis is consistently placed on the inherent connection between a convention and its relevant "sense of interest." As a result, detached reflection and interest calculation, which are characteristic of the standard conception of enlightened self-interest, hardly features in this picture.

When discussing the human weakness of the will in resisting the temptation of immediate desires and passions, Hume more clearly indicates that this sense of interest has become a very strong belief and sentiment. He writes:

[M]en are so sincerely attach'd to their interest, and their interest is so much concern'd in the observance of justice, and this interest is so certain and avow'd; it may be ask'd, how any disorder can ever arise in society, and what principle there is in human nature so powerful as to overcome *so strong a passion*, or so violent as to obscure *so clear a knowledge*? (T 3.2.7.1; SBN 534; emphasis added)

For our purpose, the message this passage reveals is that over time "a sense of interest" will be firmly established. Thus, Hume can speak of the sense of interest as "so strong a passion" and "so clear a knowledge."

This feature also manifests itself in Hume's summary of his account of justice.

Upon the whole, then, we are to consider this distinction betwixt justice and injustice, as having two different foundations, *viz.* that of *self-interest*, when men observe, that 'tis impossible to live in society without restraining themselves by certain rules; and that of *morality*, when this interest is once observ'd to be common to all mankind ... 'Tis the voluntary convention and artifice of men, which makes the first interest take place; and therefore those laws of justice are so far to be consider'd as artificial. After this interest is once establish'd and acknowledg'd, the sense of morality in the observance of these rules follows naturally, and of itself. (T 3.2.6.11; SBN 533; original emphasis)

In this passage, the expressions "*makes the first interest take place*" and "*after this interest is once establish'd and acknowledg'd*" (emphasis added) are worth noting. Apart

from other possible significations, these can be read as referring to the shaping of a distinctive sense of interest. In these expressions, no hint of constant reflective calculation can be felt.

To summarize, the “redirected self-interest” as described by Hume can be interpreted in two different ways. The standard interpretation assimilates it into a picture of enlightened self-interest that presupposes autonomous rational agency and constant calculation of advantage; my reading claims that it is a distinctive sense of a particular interest rather than a general motive or general capacity for rational interest, and that it is highly context-specific and context-dependent. For Hume, human beings certainly can be reflective and calculating from time to time. However, he claims that self-interested calculation cannot be the constant and stable state of mind of human beings. Therefore, it cannot be relied on as a primary source of motivation for maintaining general rules.

This distinctive sense of interest bears important similarities to the class of calm passions as identified by Hume. As explained in the preceding chapter, these calm passions are all naturally implanted tendencies to be concerned with certain long-term interests. Hume denies that the motive of rational self-interest can invariably move agents to adhere to general rules. So he intends this class of calm passions to take over the role assigned to self-interested calculation. According to Hume, these calm passions are fixed dispositions of human nature. They do not require detached rationality and interest calculation for their sustenance, and they operate insensibly to direct our attention to those remote but fundamental interests, such as our health, family, friends, material prosperity, etc. The “sense of interest,” as described by Hume, is similar to calm passions in being a fixed concern with a particular long-term interest. However, this “sense of

interest” is not an original passion of human nature, but arises from human artifice. It extends the range of human concerns to their new long-term interests related to artificial institutions. Hume’s “redirected interest” originates from conscious action in primitive society, but over time it has become a fixed sense of a particular interest. For the people involved, this “sense of common interest ... induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules” (T 3.2.2.10; SBN 490).

If this understanding of Hume’s “redirected self-interest” is correct, then by Hume’s account there is no unbridgeable gap between “a sense of interest” and the dispositional state of Hume’s artificial virtues. To be sure, this distinctive sense of interest is still different from the disposition of the artificial virtues. Like calm passions, this sense of interest can not necessarily prevail over violent and pernicious passions. Even if Hume speaks of it as “so strong a passion” and “so clear a knowledge” (T 3.2.7.1; SBN 534), he observes that it can easily be overcome by immediate temptations and violent passions.

Habituation and “the Effects of Custom”

In the beginning of the discussion of artificial virtues in the Treatise, Hume says:

When any virtuous motive or principle is common in 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*. (T 3.2.1.8; SBN 479; emphasis added)

Here, Hume clearly thinks that a virtuous disposition, or “virtuous motive or principle,” can be acquired through practice. The last section has shown that Hume’s distinctive

sense of interest is an important step toward the formation of the dispositional state of the artificial virtues. This disposition to conform to the rules of liberal institutions, however, is shaped primarily through people's engagement in the very practices those rules are supposed to sustain. The continuing conformity to the rules, driven by the "redirected interest," can habituate people to the relevant pattern of behavior. Eventually, a habitual and unreflective disposition to follow the rules will emerge. This section will examine Hume's account regarding the role of habituation in shaping the dispositional qualities of artificial virtues.

Commentators, however, tend not to take this line of explanation seriously. As shown earlier in this chapter, many of them do not even think that Hume's artificial virtues are dispositions of character, so the question of the role of habit in shaping these dispositions will probably not come up in the first place. On the other hand, among those commentators who do agree that the artificial virtues are dispositions of character, the prevailing interpretation is that moral sentiment plays a dominant role in shaping the disposition of character. Its typical argument goes as follows: people driven by the self-interest motive establish conventions, and the conventions define the patterns of acts. These acts bring about beneficial consequences such as peace and prosperity. Moral sentiment of approval arises in response to these consequences, thus attaching a sense of morality to these acts. This moral sentiment is strengthened in various ways (for instance, education, public opinion, love of fame, etc.), eventually becoming a motivating

sentiment, which constitutes the psychological state of the artificial virtues and moves people to observe the rules.²⁴

Before moving on to my interpretation, we need to take a further look at the nature of this opposite interpretation. This line of interpretation is unnatural in that it ignores the basic fact that people can be habituated to certain patterns of behavior. Considering how prominently custom and habit figure in Hume's theory, this omission appears especially unnatural. This interpretation also contradicts some central principles of Hume's moral theory. For one thing, it clearly belies the principle that the proper object of the moral sentiment of appraisal is always character traits. For another, it is doubtful that Hume intends moral sentiment to directly motivate compliance with rules. Although there are passages and sentences that can be interpreted in support of this interpretation, on several occasions Hume indicates that moral sentiment "is too weak to control our passions" (T, Textual Notes, 671).²⁵

Why, then, this unnatural interpretation? And most of all, why this unusual silence on the role of repeated performance of acts of justice in the formation of artificial virtues? The answer has much to do with these commentators' vigilance against the motive of self-interest. Repeated performance of acts of justice must be driven by certain motives, especially in the early stage of the development of artificial institutions. As we have repeatedly seen, given the parameters Hume sets up for the discussion, our explanation starts with "redirected self-interest" and the reactive sentiment of morality.

²⁴ Cohon, "Hume's Difficulty with Honesty"; Snare, *Morals, Motivation and Convention*; Margaret Watkins Tate, "Obligation, Justice, and the Will in Hume's Moral Philosophy," *Hume Studies* 31, no.1 (April 2005): 93–122.

²⁵ For an influential discussion of this issue, see Brown, "Is Hume an Internalist?"

Everything considered, “redirected self-interest” seems the only candidate for this motive. After all, Hume unequivocally states that self-interest is the original motive in the establishment of conventions. He also holds the principle that the direct object of moral evaluating sentiment is always mental quality of character. A disposition must exist first to call forth the moral sentiment. So if we focus on repeated performance of rule-following behavior, the most logical option is to first explain this repeated performance through the operation of “redirected self-interest.” Other factors, such as moral sentiment of approval, social opinion, family, and education, etc., come into play only after the regular performance of rule-following behavior has begun to produce habit.

Although Hume never explicitly stresses the connection between “redirected interest” and habituation, this conclusion seems to be a necessary corollary of his theory. Therefore it will not be difficult to understand why repeated performance of acts of justice is often neglected in the discussion on the issue of the formation of the artificial virtues: the equation of “redirected self-interest” with enlightened self-interest is certainly a major reason for this choice of view.²⁶ But before I elaborate this point, it is more important to note the modern understanding of morality, which is the larger picture behind this equation. While the modern understanding of morality is a complicated topic, it seems safe to say that it has two central related features. The first concerns the emphasis on self-consciousness and reflection, and the second is that altruism or benevolence is taken to be the central content of moral consciousness.²⁷ In contrast with

²⁶ Cohon, “Hume’s Difficulty with Honesty.”

²⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Claes G. Ryn, “Virtue: Real and Imagined,” in *The Unbought Grace of*

this moral imagination of self-conscious altruism, enlightened self-interest constitutes a mirror image, namely, deliberative self-concern.²⁸ Thus we have the typical opposition of morality and self-interest in contemporary moral theory. With this simplistic dualism, it will certainly be difficult to conceive of any positive role that “redirected interest” could play in the shaping of the artificial virtues. This should be an underlying reason why commentators choose that awkward interpretation indicated above.²⁹

This understanding helps bring out our underlying reason for emphasizing the continuity between the self-interested motive and the shaping of artificial virtues. The view that the individual’s good may deeply conflict with the public good took hold of Western thought only as a result of the fading of the metaphysical or theological outlook. It was against this background that the dualism of selfishness versus benevolence came to dominate the moral debate.³⁰ Although Hume was greatly influenced by this debate, his understanding of virtues took a different direction. He rejects the reductionism of the dualism, holding that it is impossible to “reduce all the various emotions of the human mind to a perfect simplicity. The case is not the same in this species of philosophy as in physics” (EPM App.2.7; SBN 299). For him, neither selfishness nor benevolence was a single trait of character; both were collective names for a group of character traits. He

Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk, ed. James E. Person (La Salle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden, 1994).

²⁸ For a discussion of the historical origin of the modern idea of morality, see Darwall, *British Moralists and Internal ‘ought,’* introduction.

²⁹ Norton, “Morality in Hume’s *Treatise*.”

³⁰ Darwall, *British Moralists and Internal ‘ought,’* introduction.

talks, therefore, about “avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions vulgarly, though improperly, comprised under the denomination of self-love,” (EPM 9.5; SBN 271) and places under the category of “benevolence” virtues such as being “sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, [and] beneficent” (EPM 2.1; SBN 176). More importantly, he claims that man’s natural benevolent feelings are essentially partial in nature and limited in their range of application. In order to ensure impartial treatment of strangers, we have to extend our natural sentiments beyond their original bounds and produce a new class of artificial virtues. This impartial morality arises from artifice and convention, and is manifested in the motivational state of the artificial virtues. Considered this way, the artificial virtues go beyond the opposition between reflective self-interest and self-conscious benevolence. They are neither self-regarding nor other-regarding but inherently associated with artificial conventions and therefore highly context-dependent and context-relative. Accordingly, they do not tend to involve reflective state of mind; rather, they are typically fixed and unreflective dispositions to follow general rules.

With this larger picture in mind, we can go back to the more direct reason for the unnatural silence on habituation, namely, the problematic interpretation of Hume’s notion of self-interest. As should be clear now, there are two different understandings of Hume’s “redirected self-interest.” One tries to assimilate it to the standard idea of enlightened self-interest that is essentially connected with the model of rational man. The other stresses its dependence for constant operation on a particular context and the resulting distinctive sense of interest. The model of enlightened self-interest will by definition preclude the idea of habituation because the agent in this model is supposed to keep a

distance from his own psychological state and adjusts his behavior according to a calculation of advantage. By this interpretation, there is no room for considering the shaping effects of repeated performance of certain patterns of behavior and no room for ideas like firm and unreflective dispositions.

Now, we can examine Hume's account of habituation. I will first have a general review of Hume's conceptions of custom and habit, and then turn to his remarks on habituation as regards the formation of the artificial virtues.

The conception of "habit" or "custom" occupies a much more important place in Hume's philosophy than in most other systems. Indeed, given the fundamental assumptions of his naturalistic project, the significance of habit or custom can be anticipated. Hume is a paradigmatic example in attempting to account for human nature on the basis of the minimal epistemological and metaphysical assumptions. Between the "original qualities" of human nature and the concrete complexity of human life, there is a great deal of ground to be covered. Some other factors or principles must be brought in to fill the gap. In the area of the "understanding," as Book 1 of the *Treatise* demonstrates, the fundamental importance of custom and habit is clearly highlighted by Hume. He stresses that experience and custom are two major principles in the establishment of our beliefs regarding the self, the external world, and causal relations. Particularly on the issue of causality, custom or habit is at the heart of his account. In moral and political

theory, the fundamental importance of artifice and convention suggests a significant role of custom and habit in this area.³¹

By custom or habit, Hume essentially means “repetition,” repeated experience, repeated activity, repetition of performance, etc.³² There are subtle differences, though, between Hume’s uses of “custom” and “habit.” He tends to use the term “custom” to refer to repetition and often speaks of “the effect of custom”; whereas by “habit” he often refers to the result of that repetition. Repetition is important because of “the effect of custom.”³³ According to his theory of causation, for instance, “the effect of custom” arising from repeated experience of constant union of like objects gives rise to a certain

³¹ Hume uses the term “custom” to refer to repetition, but he also often uses the plural form “customs” to refer to the established social practices and tradition. It is important to distinguish these two uses. Here the former use is our focus.

³² Hutcheson and Butler have similar understanding of custom or habit. Hutcheson writes, “Custom ...only gives a disposition to the Mind or Body more easily to perform those Actions which have been frequently repeated,” in Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 70. Butler writes, “Habits belonging to the Body, are produced by external Acts,” and “practical Habits are formed and strengthened by repeated Acts,” in *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, quoted from John P. Wright, “Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 106–07. However, custom or habit is far less important in their philosophy than in Hume’s.

³³ There is the repetition of active performance, but there is also the repetition of passive experience. The formation of a disposition is first and foremost related to active performance, but it certainly involves the repetition of other sorts of experience as well. For example, Hume makes the following observation when discussing the rules of property, “Such is the effect of custom, that it not only reconciles us to any thing we have long enjoy’d, but even gives us an affection for it, and makes us prefer it to other objects, which may be more valuable, but are less known to us. What has long lain under our eye, and has often been employ’d to our advantage, *that* we are always the most unwilling to part with; but can easily live without possessions, which we never have enjoy’d, and are not accustom’d to” (T 3.2.3.4; SBN 504). He makes similar observation regarding the subject’s attachment to their rulers, “Nothing causes any sentiment to have a greater influence upon us than custom, or turns our imagination more strongly to any object. When we have been long accustom’d to obey any set of men, that general instinct or tendency, which we have to suppose a moral obligation attending loyalty, takes easily this direction, and chooses that set of men for its objects” (T 3.2.10.4; SBN 556).

tendency of mind and the belief of a necessary connection. In the theory of action, which is directly relevant to our current issue, Hume observes:

Custom has two *original* effects upon the mind, in bestowing a *facility* in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterwards a *tendency or inclination* towards it; and from these we may account for all its other effects, however extraordinary. (T 2.3.5.1; SBN 422; original emphasis)

Thus the effect of custom is to generate certain tendencies of mind or body. In a world without metaphysical or theological foundation, the effect of custom takes on a special significance. For Hume, custom or habit becomes a great constructing power and stabilizing force. In the world of thought, the effect of custom shapes our ideas of various causal relations, which, according to Hume, is essential to our picture of the world. In the world of action, what is the significance of the effect of custom? Hume has a specific answer to this question.

As shown in the preceding chapter, Hume stresses that “the reason why men so often act in contradiction to their known interest” is “their violent propensity to prefer contiguous to remote.” Even if we are fully convinced of the importance of certain long-term interest, “We are not able to regulate our actions by this judgment; but yield to the solicitations of our passions, which always plead in favor of whatever is near and contiguous” (T 3.2.7.3 & 6; SBN 535–37). In the discussion of calm passions, Hume makes a similar observation. Calm passions do not always prevail when confronted by violent passions. “Men often act knowingly against their interest: for which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418). In this regard, neither the sense of interest nor calm passions can be a reliable

motivation for compliance. Moreover, the general virtue, strength of mind, is too demanding to be a reliable solution.

However, Hume also considers another solution in his account of calm passions. He indicates that the intensity of a passion is different from its strength. Although intense and violent passions often determine our will, they do not always prevail. “[W]hen a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul,” its operation will be insensible, but its effect could be stronger than violent passions. This is the typical way in which a truly settled disposition operates. It guides our action without producing any sensible agitation. A person can be so thoroughly transformed that any opposite violent passion does not have a chance to arise. How has this transformation been produced? Hume’s answer is, “as *repeated custom and its own force have made everything yield to it*, it [a certain calm passion] directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion” (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 419; emphasis added). So, a calm passion can be stronger than violent passions by becoming a settled disposition through “repeated custom.”

Three points are important here. First, this latter solution is different from that of strength of mind. A calm passion is a distinctive passion, which means that it is relative to certain particular contexts and has distinctive patterns of external performance. Repetition of performance will gradually give rise to a relevant disposition. Instead of being prudent in a general way, a person can become disposed to pursue certain long-term interest but indifferent to another fundamental interest. This approach is certainly more realistic than the general virtue approach. A general virtue goes beyond concrete

contexts and is too abstract for individuals to pursue in concrete practice. Second, Hume clearly indicates that repeated performance is the primary method by which a calm passion can be made the “predominant inclination of the soul.” Similarly, dispositional qualities of artificial virtues can arise from the repeated custom of relevant patterns of acts. Finally, if a calm passion can become a settled disposition through repetition of performance, then the psychological state of this disposition will essentially be an unreflective tendency or blind habit. It is a fixed and firm disposition that adheres to certain long-term interests without a calculation of immediate costs and benefits, either to the individual or to the public.

Immediate temptation and violent passions are what disrupt our adherence to long-term interests. Hume denies that self-conscious calculation can be a reliable motive for our dealing with these disturbances. The idea of pitting passion against passion or self-regulation of a passion provides no reliable solution, either. So both Hume’s account of “redirected interest” and his account of calm passions lead to the same conclusion, that is, only a fixed and unreflective disposition can be sufficient in power to overcome agitating passions. As he puts it, “We must ... distinguish betwixt a calm and a weak passion; betwixt a violent and a strong one” (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 419). A calm but strong passion is not merely a calm passion. It is a calm passion that has been transformed into a disposition. Instead of pitting passion against passion, or pitting interest against passion, Hume recommends the idea of setting disposition against passion. Actually, to speak of pitting disposition against passion is a little exaggerating; it will be more accurate to speak of the prevalence of the disposition. Dispositions are “durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character” (T

3.3.1.4; SBN 575). When a passion has become a settled disposition, “it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation,” and it has “made everything yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion” (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 419).

This account of calm passions brings custom and habit to center stage in Hume’s moral and political theory. Hume stresses, “[N]othing has a greater effect both to increase and diminish our passions ... than custom and repetition.” His message is simple and clear: insofar as human practice is concerned, custom or habit is repetition of performance, and its effect is “bestowing a *facility* in the performance of any action...and afterwards a *tendency or inclination* towards it” (T 2.3.5.1; SBN 422; original emphasis).

This is directly relevant to our current problem of the formation of dispositions of artificial virtues. First, as argued in the last section, over time, Hume’s “redirected self-interest” has become a fixed concern with the long-term interest in maintaining justice. It has become “so strong a passion” and “so clear a knowledge,” and very much like a calm passion, although it is acquired, not innate. Hume’s description of the transformation of calm passions into dispositions, therefore, is applicable here.

The second point is that we can even set the first point aside and go straight to repetition and habituation. A defining feature of Hume’s artificial virtues is their inherent connection with the system of general rules. In other words, their corresponding pattern of external performance is clearly defined, and repeated performance of relevant acts is required by convention. The early practice of acts of justice is, more or less, motivated by conscious calculation, but as conventions governing property grow, the effect of repeated

performance of rule-following acts also begins to accumulate; the disposition to follow the rules begins to take shape.

As mentioned above, “habit” is often used by Hume to refer to the result of repeated performance. In this sense, habit amounts to the formed disposition, tendency or inclination. Hume variously calls a disposition as “motive,” “quality,” “character,” or “principle of mind,” so there are cases in which he uses these terms and habit synonymously. Consider the following phrases or sentences: (1) “where a *quality or habit* is subjected to our examination”; (2) “never lose view of the advantages, which result from any *character or habit*” (EPM 6.2; SBN 233); (3) “Every *passion, habit, or turn of character*...which has a tendency to our advantage or prejudice, gives a delight or uneasiness” (T 2.1.7.3; SBN 295); and (4) “he becomes...favorable to all those *habits or principles*, which promote order in society” (EPM 5.5; SBN 215). These uses are evidences that for Hume there is an inherent connection between habit and dispositional state of character.

Now, let us look at Hume’s account of artificial virtues to see the role of habituation in the formation of these virtues. Justice is still our typical case. After examining this case, we will go to other artificial virtues.

One good way to appreciate the role of habituation in the formation of the disposition of justice is to see how so prominent a factor can be ignored by the problematic interpretation mentioned above. I have surveyed the theoretical reasons for this curious negligence, which involves a modern understanding of morality and the rationalist conception of enlightened self-interest. Now we will see how that problematic interpretation leaves habituation out of the picture.

Hume states that self-interest is the original motive in the establishment of justice, while his account of the formation of moral sentiment of approval toward justice gives the impression that this reactive feeling comes only after society has gone beyond its first stage. Not surprisingly, that problematic interpretation indicated above, with its problematic understanding of self-interest and morality, brings together these two features of Hume's account and develops a two-stage theory. According to this theory, enlightened self-interest serves a motivational role in the first stage of social development, and when society becomes larger and more complicated, moral sentiment of approval arises and is strengthened by many other factors into the dominant motive of rule-following behavior. Therefore, social development is divided into two distinctive stages, which strictly matches the distinction between enlightened self-interest and moral sentiment of appraisal.³⁴

The great problem with this two-stage theory is its unhistorical way of thinking. As shown in the preceding section, to interpret Hume's "redirected interest" in terms of enlightened self-interest reveals a lack of historical sensibility. Now, this two-stage theory further denies the possibility that there might be a deep continuity in the process of social development and that some important traits could evolve from the people's continuing performance of acts of justice, driven by Hume's "redirected self-interest." As a result, the significance of habituation is concealed. Although this problematic reading

³⁴ Rachel Cohon's article is a typical example regarding this two-stage distinction. For other cases, see Norton, "Morality in Hume's *Treatise*" and Tate, "Obligation, Justice, and Will." Although these accounts differ in details, they all neglect the role of habituation and the possible involvement of the self-interest motive in the formation of the artificial virtues.

has some textual support, it cannot accommodate other important remarks by Hume. A

typical example is a passage from the second *Enquiry*, which needs to be quoted at length:

But suppose the conjunction of the sexes to be established in nature, a family immediately arises; and particular rules being found requisite for its subsistence, these are immediately embraced; though without comprehending the rest of mankind within their prescriptions. Suppose, that several families unite together into one society, which is totally disjoined from all others, the rules, which preserve peace and order, enlarge themselves to the utmost extent of that society; but becoming then entirely useless, lose their force when carried one step farther. But again suppose, that several distinct societies maintain a kind of intercourse for mutual convenience and advantage, the boundaries of justice still grow larger, in proportion to the largeness of men's views, and the force of their mutual connexions. History, experience, reason sufficiently instruct us in this natural progress of human sentiments, and in the gradual enlargement of our regards to justice, in proportion as we become acquainted with the extensive utility of that virtue. (EPM 3.21; SBN 192)

This picture features a gradual development. There is no clear delimitation of two stages.

According to this picture, the formation and maintenance of the conventions of justice, the regular performance of acts of justice that leads to habituation, and the evocation of moral sentiment of approval toward acts of justice and motivation of justice, are all different aspects of the same long process.

According to Hume, this long development of justice should be traced back all the way down to the family in primitive society. For him, the union of a man and a woman is already a “society,” and the birth of children “forms a more numerous society,”

In a little time, *custom and habit* operating on the tender minds of the children, makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society, as well as *fashions them by degrees* for it, by rubbing off those rough corners and untoward affections, which prevent their coalition. (T 3.2.2.4; SBN 486; emphasis added)

Note here that the sense of the long-term interest in having social life does not appear as the result of detached reflection and self-conscious calculation but arises as a dimension

of a long development. A similar observation is made again, “Men, from their early education in society, have become sensible of the infinite advantages that result from it, and have besides acquir’d a new affection to company and conversation” (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489).

In another passage, Hume more clearly stresses that the rules of justice have their origin in the family. He claims that it can be assumed “...that nothing can be more simple and obvious than that rule [the rule for the stability of possession]; that *every parent, in order to preserve peace among his children, must establish it*; and that these first rudiments of justice must *every day be improv’d, as the society enlarges*” (T 3.2.2.14; SBN 493; emphasis added). The process described here obviously involves habituation.

As mentioned in the second chapter, the conception of convention can also be interpreted along two different lines. One can understand it in terms of game-theoretical reading, regarding it as a self-interested agreement among calculating individuals; one can also focus on its historically evolved character, viewing it as arising from long evolution. The historical dimension is the key here. As long as one remembers this is a long evolution, it will be clear that something like habit and disposition will take shape as a result. An unhistorical view will deny importance to habituation, whereas a historical understanding of the issue provides huge room for habituation to play its role. In the context of historical development, people acquire the regard to justice “when train’d up according to a certain discipline and education” (T 3.2.1.9; SBN 479). The effect of custom becomes clear from this historical perspective,

[W]hat we have very frequently performed from certain motives, we are apt likewise to continue mechanically, without recalling, on every occasion, the reflections, which first determin’d us. (EPM 3.47; SBN 203)

Besides, family education also involves habituation. Hume repeatedly indicates that artificial virtues arise from convention and education (T 3.2.1.15 & 18; SBN 483). Convention is the primary artifice regarding the formation of artificial virtues. Occasionally Hume speaks of private education and politician's instruction as "a new artifice." According to Hume, parents perceive the benefit in habituating their children to justice, and they also observe that "those principles [moral principles] have greater force, when custom and education assist interest and reflexion: For this reason they are induc'd to inculcate on their children, from their earliest infancy, the principles of probity" (T 3.2.2.26; SBN 500).

Turning to other artificial virtues, habit and custom also have a major role in the formation of their dispositional qualities. Regarding the virtue of the keeping of promise, Hume indicates that conventions of promise "create a new motive" (T 3.2.5.10; SBN 522). In another place, He says more clearly that it should be "an inclination to perform" the promised act (T 3.2.5.7; SBN 519). So the keeping of promise is understood by him in terms of the inner disposition, which is product of the operation of convention, rather than any other factors such as moral sentiment of approval, or pressure of social opinion.

In the case of politeness, the rules of civility need to be obeyed, and it takes habituation to acquire those habits to restrain the manifestation of our pride. "There are certain differences and mutual submissions, which custom requires of the different ranks of men towards each other... 'Tis necessary to feel the sentiments and passion of pride in conformity to it, and to regulate our actions accordingly." Hume deliberately denies prudence itself to be a good guide in this regard, "And shou'd it be said, that prudence

may suffice to regulate our actions in this particular ... I wou'd observe, that here the object of prudence is to conform our actions to the general usage and custom" (T 3.3.2.11; SBN 599).

When it comes to allegiance and sexual morality, an interesting tendency can be perceived. Compared with the virtues of justice and promise, political allegiance and sexual morality more contradict the natural tendency of their corresponding passions, at least by Hume's account. In his own words, the passion of avidity needs to be redirected or "restrained"; but as to the case of allegiance, its corresponding natural passion of license and love of dominion must be "sacrificed." Accordingly, habit seems to serve a more important role. As we have seen in the second chapter, the virtue of political allegiance itself, by Hume's account, simply takes the form of habit. Hume has an account of the habituation process regarding this virtue. His conclusion is "Habit soon consolidates what other principles of human nature had imperfectly founded" (E, "Of the Origin of Government," 39).

Sexual morality, involving the virtues such as modesty and chastity, is an extreme case. Hume deliberately takes this extreme case to make a point. In this case, the relevant natural passion is very strong and constant. For Hume, this case extremely illustrates the incurable weakness of will:

All human creatures, especially of the female sex, are apt to over-look remote motives in favour of any present temptation: The temptation is here the strongest imaginable: Its approaches are insensible and seducing: And a woman easily finds, or flatters herself she shall find, certain means of securing her reputation, and preventing all the pernicious consequences of her pleasures. 'Tis necessary, therefore, that, beside the infamy attending such licenses, there shou'd be some preceding backwardness or dread, which may prevent their first approaches, and may give the female sex a repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and

liberties, that have an immediate relation to that enjoyment. (T 3.2.12.5; SBN 571–72)

Note Hume clearly thinks that at least in this case social opinion of morality alone is not enough, what is needed is an internalized repugnance, a visceral tendency to adhere to norms and rules. How can this blind disposition be formed? Hume suggests that the point of sexual morality is to help men to identify their children, thus ensure that his property is inherited by his own children. This interpretation makes the formation of morality more difficult, since the main body of restrained people, women, do not have direct interest in conforming to sexual morality. However, people still succeed in forming this disposition through “custom and education.” “Those, who have an interest in the fidelity of women, naturally disapprove of their infidelity, and all the approaches to it. Those, who have no interest, are carried along with the stream. Education takes possession of the duple minds of the fair sex in their infancy. And when a general rule of this kind is once establish’d, men are apt to extend it beyond those principles, from which it first arose. Thus batchelors, however debauch’d, cannot chuse but be shock’d with any instance of lewdness or impudence in women” (T 3.2.12.7; SBN 572).

From justice to allegiance to sexual morality, habit becomes more and more important because unreflective tendency is more and more required. These distinctive dispositions of character can be formed only through the engagement in the very practices those rules are supposed to sustain. “Redirected self-interest” plays a motivational role in the formative process. But since these dispositions are fixed and unreflective tendencies to follow rules, they do not involve reflective calculation, and

they do not even involve the fixed sense of a particular long-term interest. As Hume puts it, “The custom operates before we have time for reflexion” (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 104).

Chapter Five

Liberal Virtues and Commercial Society as a Way of Life

This chapter will place the problem of virtue in a wider context. The discussion so far has established that Hume distrusts self-conscious calculation as a motivation of compliance and so turns to unreflective dispositions in order to ensure compliance. This chapter will show that Hume's emphasis on the dispositional motive has deep roots in his general philosophy of causation and human agency. Hume's understanding of social causation focuses on the causal relation between character and action, and his notion of human agency adopts a dispositional approach. In this context, the regularity of actions must rely on the causal tendencies of the agent.

Another implication of associating Hume's account of the artificial virtues with his theory of causation and human agency is that for him, widely shared qualities are formed primarily through the operation of social causes. This implication will bring us to Hume's social and historical writings in general and his account of commercial society in particular. His observations of history reveal the variety of the passions and the diversity of the ways of life. I will read Hume's account of the commercial regime as an attempt to balance his naturalistic view of the liberal order and the complexity of human nature. To accommodate this complexity, Hume extends the catalogue of the artificial virtues to a model of the liberal personality.

A Dispositional Account of Social Causation and Human Agency

While the idea of virtue is central to Greek ethics, modern ethics embraces the notion of obligation. Insofar as virtue theory had a role to play in modern thought, it underwent many significant changes. Before the advent of modernity, virtue ethics was characterized by the pursuit of an ideal of either human perfection or eternal salvation. For Aristotle, the ideal is grounded in a teleological understanding of the natural order in general and human nature in particular. The content of the human perfection is manifested in the flourishing life of human beings. Virtues are excellent dispositions constitutive of that highest perfection. However, traditionally conceived virtue ethics came to lose its hold on the human imagination during the early modern period. Instead of the teleological outlook, a naturalistic picture of causal necessity took center stage. Within the context of naturalistic determinism, the human being tends to be understood as a creature of desire and passion, whose action is driven by the strongest impulse of the moment. From this perspective, it is quite natural that pitting passion against passion becomes a popular political idea. Hobbes provides a typical example in this respect when he appeals to the most compelling and peaceful passions to move people toward submission to the sovereign. He declares that the idea is to find a passion that would necessarily drive people into submission like gravity causes a stone to roll down a hill.

However, even if modern politics confines its purpose to securing peace and prosperity, this limited goal still generates moral requirements that people cannot naturally meet. Ironically, Hobbes is also typical in exposing the unreliability of the naturalistic strategy. He finds it necessary to set out nineteen “precepts of reason,” giving

prominence to virtues required for making possible peaceful coexistence.¹ However, it seems that this account of virtues is given on an ad hoc basis. Hobbes does not explain how his precepts can be made compatible with his central strategy of playing passion against passion. The precepts of reason are given simply as hypothetical imperatives.² Within the bounds of his theory, Hobbes can only appeal to the reasonableness of the natural man to pursue those virtues. The argument seems to be viciously circular. In brief, Hobbes has made an essential move in defining virtues not in relation to the human perfection but in terms of their contribution to peace and order. He does not, however, provide an explanation regarding the status of these social virtues in his mechanical picture of the world.

Considered against this background, Hume's account of the artificial virtues follows Hobbes's essential move in defining virtues according to their social functions, but he goes beyond Hobbes in explicitly integrating his account of virtue into a causal understanding of man and society. Two steps are essential to Hume's causal explanation of virtues. The first is that Hume characterizes causation concerning human affairs almost entirely in terms of the causal relation between qualities of character and actions. The second is that Hume understands the human person in terms of qualities of character when it comes to moral and political practice.

Hume's understanding of nature and human society is essentially causal. For him, the course of nature is characterized by the constant conjunction of similar objects.

¹ Berkowitz, *Virtue and Modern Liberalism*, 55–64.

² David Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan: the moral and political theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), chap.1.

Likewise, “there is a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate” (T 2.3.1.10; SBN 402–03). It is important to note the specific way in which Hume understands the nature of the regularity of actions in human life. The causal connections as regards human affairs can be explored from different angles. For instance, one can take the regularity of actions to be the unintended consequences of interaction among individuals. The causal relations concerning the operation of the market as explained in modern economics are typical cases in this regard. Along this line of thought, human beings are typically pictured as rational actors who are not affected with passions and always adjust their behavior on the basis of interest calculation. On the other hand, one can focus on character traits, attributing the regularity of actions to dispositional tendencies of the agent. Hume’s essays on political economy show that he is quite aware of the former type of causal relation in human society,³ but when it comes to philosophical account of social causation, both in the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*, Hume clearly focuses on the causal relation between character and action. As he puts it, “the doctrine of necessity,” as far as human affairs are concerned, involves “this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions; from characters to conduct” (EHU 8.18; SBN 90).⁴

³ See Andrew Skinner, “Hume’s principles of Political Economy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed. ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 381–413; Sakamoto Tatsuya, “Hume’s Economic Theory,” in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Blackwell: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 373–87. Hume’s sensitivity to unintended consequences of the operation of the market also finds important expression in his *History of England*.

⁴ There is another problem with Hume’s focus on the causal relation between character and action. Hume draws a close parallel between causal necessity regarding physical things and causal necessity regarding human affairs. However, there is a difference between the two sorts of

In the discussion of the causal relation between character and action, Hume begins by stating that human nature consists of similar passions and those similar passions produce similar actions. He writes, “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....Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit; these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind” (EHU 8.7; SBN 83).

Hume’s account of human nature is often criticized as unhistorical, and the passage just quoted above is frequently cited as typical evidence to support this charge.⁵ However, if we follow Hume closely in the development of his argument, we will find that this seemingly unhistorical picture almost immediately gives way to an emphasis on social and cultural diversity. This shift in emphasis can be seen more clearly in the first *Enquiry* than in the *Treatise*:

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 8.10; SBN 85)

The regularity of actions is still the focus of attention, but now it becomes a local or cultural regularity. Hume claims, “From observing the variety of conduct in different men,

causality. Hume’s idea of physical necessity is based on regular conjunction of two types of like events, which are typically observable so that we know the regular conjunction by direct observation. When it comes to human affairs, the cause is no longer events, but dispositional mental qualities, which cannot be directly observed. We infer dispositions from observed regularity of actions. Hume does not explicitly address this difference. For a discussion of this issue, see McIntyre, “Character: a Humean Account.”

⁵ For a systematic analysis of Hume’s sense of history, see Livingston, *Philosophy of Common Life*. Also see Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, chap.4.

we are enabled to form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity” (EHU 8.10; SBN 85). Accordingly, the motives involved now are no longer purely natural passions, but become culturally evolved dispositions. To his question, “Are the manners of men different in different ages and countries?” Hume responds, “We learn thence the great force of custom and education, which mould the human mind from its infancy, and form it into a fixed and established character” (EHU 8.11; SBN 86).

The empirical observations Hume makes in support of his theory may not be sufficient to establish the strict causal necessity of human affairs as he appears to suppose.⁶ For our purposes, however, a moderate view will be enough, that is, to the extent that any regularity of actions exists, this regularity must be traced to the dispositions of the agent. This view can be seen as a further support for the arguments made in the previous chapters. The regularity of rule-following behavior can arise only from the stable and enduring dispositions of members in society. The stability of the liberal order relies on neither voluntary commitment nor rational calculation. Instead, it depends on a set of unreflective propensities widely possessed by the people living in the liberal society. As Hume puts it, “No union can be more constant and certain, than that of some actions with some motives and characters” (T 2.3.1.12; SBN 404).

On the other hand, Hume’s preoccupation with dispositions of mind finds further expression in his attempt to develop a notion of the person essentially in terms of

⁶ See Antony Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief: A Study of His First Inquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), chap. 7.

qualities of character. This dispositional understanding of the self is quite different from Hume's well known definition of the mind or self.

As mentioned in the third chapter, Hume denies the plausibility of the notion of the substantial self, which is more or less presupposed by the ideas of voluntary commitment and rational calculation. Hume's well-known definition of the mind or self focuses on immediate mental experience (for brevity's sake, I shall hereafter refer to this definition as Hume's "official definition" of the mind or self). In Book 1 of the *Treatise*, he reduces the self to a totality of occurrent perceptions. He famously claims that the mind or self is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 252) and that "the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance" (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 253). In Hume's account of the passions in Book 2 of the *Treatise*, although the self is assigned a different role in relation to the mechanism of indirect passions, this definition is essentially repeated. The self is again described as "that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness" (T 2.1.2.2; SBN 277).

Hume's official definition of the self focuses entirely on the immediate and self-conscious content of our mental experience. It cannot accommodate the dispositional aspect of the human person. However, it now should be clear that this dispositional aspect of the person is essential to Hume's account of human agency. According to Hume, although sensation is typically momentary and transient, passions are often more durable. Attempts have been made by some commentators to draw on the durability of the

passions to provide an ontological foundation for qualities of character.⁷ However, the success of this move is very doubtful, since the key distinction here is not between momentary and durable perceptions, but between perceptions and dispositions.⁸ As another commentator rightly indicates, “Character traits as durable features of mind cannot simply consist in occurrent perceptions as such,” no matter how durable these perceptions can be. “Rather, for someone to have a certain trait of character is for that person to be disposed to experience a distinctive kind of impression of reflection” and act in characteristic ways.⁹ The passions, as Hume understands them, are not confined to the immediately available content of mental experience. It can be argued that the passions in Hume’s text logically involve a dispositional state. However, Hume never explicitly makes the distinction between immediate perceptions and dispositions with regard to the passions. Insofar as Hume’s official definition of the mind or self involves passion, it is essentially in the form of impression rather than disposition. Moreover, his explicit discussion of passion largely considers it as occurrent impression.¹⁰

⁷ Jane McIntyre tries to draw on the durability of the passions to provide an ontological foundation for qualities of character. But she neglects the distinction between occurrent perceptions and dispositions. See her “Character: A Humean Account.” Paul Russell sympathizes with this view, see *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, 87–90. For a discussion that notices this distinction, see A. E. Pitson, *Hume’s Philosophy of the Self* (London: Routledge, 2002), 88–91.

⁸ For a contemporary discussion of this distinction and a critique of the concept of the substantial mind, see Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1949).

⁹ Pitson, *Hume’s Philosophy of Self*, 90–91.

¹⁰ Among the passions Hume deals with, calm passions clearly involve enduring state of mind. However, Hume often speaks of calm passions as if they are distinct from dispositions. For instance, he indicates that calm passions can not necessarily prevail over violent passions. “[E]ither of them prevails, according to the *general* character or *present* disposition of the person” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418; original emphasis).

Actually, Hume touches the distinction between occurrent perceptions and dispositions in Book 1 of the *Treatise*. When discussing the issue of personal identity, he writes, “The same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas” (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261). However, it is not until the discussion of social causal necessity that Hume explicitly develops a dispositional conception of the person. Both in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, Hume turns to the moral consequences of causal necessity after establishing the universal existence of the causal relation between character and action. He claims that the causal relation between character and action will not mitigate people’s responsibility for their actions. It is actually the other way around. Since people can be held accountable for their actions only if they are truly the cause of the actions; and they are truly the cause of the actions only if these actions arise from the dispositions of their character. Therefore, a human person or self is essentially his qualities of character. Hume writes:

Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform’d them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. (T 2.3.2.6; SBN 411; this passage is repeated in EHU 8.29; SBN 98)

Only the durable and constant part of the self constitutes the essence of a person. Because certain qualities connect actions to the person, “We can never think of him without reflecting on these qualities” (T 2.2.3.4; SBN 349).

In brief, Hume’s causal understanding of action and agency focuses on the dispositional qualities of the human person. He claims that causal necessity regarding human affairs is typically manifested as the causal relation between durable dispositions of character and actions, and that a person is essentially his dispositions of character.

Causal understanding of man and world was a common feature of modern thought. However, it is quite unusual to develop causal understanding of human affairs entirely in terms of qualities of character. For example, Hobbes suggests a rigorously mechanical explanation both of the physical world and the human world, but he does not give prominence to the idea of disposition.¹¹ As is the case with Hume, the underlying logic of Hobbes's conception of passion could lead to a dispositional understanding of human nature, but Hobbes never makes explicit this implication. As a result, Hobbes cannot account for the status of the virtues against the background of a mechanical picture of the world, even if he is clearly aware of the significance of certain virtues for maintaining peace and order.

Hume's contrast to Hobbes also helps reveal that while a mechanical causal explanation of man and action is closely associated with a naturalistic understanding of human nature, a dispositional notion of man and action easily leads to the social and historical dimension of human nature and human life. As shown above, the focus on character and disposition naturally brings Hume to the social and cultural diversity of character and to the historical formation of various mental qualities.

Hume's account of virtues as mental qualities is easily integrated into his naturalistic explanation of the world. For him, unlike for Aristotle or Cicero, there is no teleological foundation in nature underlying the state of human perfection. Virtues can not constitute a *sui generis* category, but are part of our mental qualities, either natural or artificial. Mental qualities cause actions, actions bring out consequences, and consequences are either beneficial or pernicious to society. The moral worth of a mental

¹¹ Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan*, chap.1.

quality is determined in terms of its causal tendency to produce useful or agreeable effects. This account of virtue is essentially naturalistic and sociological, rather than metaphysical or theological.¹²

The Involuntary Nature of Virtues

As we have seen, Hume rejects the typically modern idea of autonomous rational agency. Instead, he establishes a dispositional conception of the person. It is the possession of certain dispositions of character that makes an individual become a moral agent. Arguing against the image of a detached and reflective subject, this theory situates the agent in the causal process. The extent to which Hume commits himself to this understanding can be best seen in his general view on the problem of character formation. How can a virtuous disposition be acquired? How can a quality of character be changed? In the previous chapter we discussed Hume's view on shaping the dispositional state of the artificial virtues. In this chapter, a more theoretical discussion of this issue is in order.

Traditionally, the formation of virtues is often regarded as a matter of deliberate self-cultivation. Rational reflection plays a major role in the pursuit of human excellence. In Plato's *Republic*, the training of the future leaders of the city is presented as a well-planned project. Aristotle is well known for describing the acquisition of moral virtues as habituation, but he also conceives of the formation of character as essentially a matter of the individual's voluntary choice. He stresses that in childhood, human nature is always

¹² For a discussion of this issue, see Berkowitz, *Virtue and Modern Liberalism*, introduction. Also see Hardin, *Moral and Political Theorist*, 20–23.

amenable to influence and cultivation, and therefore a person should be held responsible for what sort of person he has come to be. Only when people enter into adulthood can their mental qualities be eventually fixed.¹³ This stress on practical reason and deliberation is largely inherited and developed in today's revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics.¹⁴ In some cases, a close parallel is even drawn between Aristotle and Kant as far as moral self-constitution goes.¹⁵

By contrast, Hume minimizes the possibility of deliberate self-cultivation and claims that virtues are acquired involuntarily for the most part.¹⁶ Hume's catalogue of virtues includes natural abilities such as judgment, understanding, and imagination. However, in modern time, natural abilities tend to be sharply distinguished from moral virtues. The typical reason for this distinction is that natural abilities cannot be acquired voluntarily and "have therefore no merit attending them, as having no dependance on liberty and free-will" (T 3.3.4.3; SBN 608). Against this emphasis on the voluntariness of virtues, Hume argues that many moral virtues "are equally involuntary and necessary, with the qualities of the judgment and imagination, of this nature are constancy, fortitude, magnanimity; and, in short, all the qualities which form the *great* men. I might say the same, in some degrees, of the others" (T 3.3.4.3; SBN 608; original emphasis). He

¹³ Maria Merritt has examined in detail Aristotle's view on the formation of moral character, see *Virtue Ethics and Psychology*. Paul Russell also draws the contrast between Hume and Aristotle in this regard, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, 127–28.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" She calls this trend in today's revival of virtue theory as "expanding reason's domain" and contrasts it with what she calls the "anti-Kantian" and "Humean" trend in contemporary moral theory.

¹⁵ For a typical example, see Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pt. 2.

¹⁶ Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, 124–28.

continues, “it being almost impossible for the mind to change its character in any considerable article, or cure itself of a passionate or splenetic temper, when they are natural to it” (T 3.3.4.3; SBN 608; also see EPM app.4.1&2; SBN 312–23). This view on virtue formation is elaborated in another passage,

The fabric and constitution of our mind no more depend on our choice, than that of our body. The generality of men have not even the smallest notion, that any alteration in this respect can ever be desirable. ... But even upon the wise and thoughtful, nature has a prodigious influence; nor is it always in a man’s power, by the utmost art and industry, to correct his temper, and attain that virtuous character, to which he aspires. (E, “The Sceptic,” 168–69)

As we have seen, according to Hume, a virtue is a mental quality that has a causal tendency to produce certain beneficial effects. Moreover, the recognition of virtue is also a causal process. The mental quality that calls forth the moral sentiment of approbation because of its beneficial effects is a virtue (T 3.3.4.1&3; SBN 607–08). In this causal account of virtue the room for voluntariness seems quite limited.

However, Hume grants that the mind is not altogether stubborn but is amenable to change to a certain degree. He points out three ways of self-cultivation: a serious study of the sciences and liberal arts; keeping a constant watch over oneself and bending one’s mind by a continual effort from the vices towards the virtues; and “repeated habit” or constraining oneself to practice virtues. However, he admits that these efforts are all very demanding. For instance, repeated practice requires strong conviction and resolution, but “[t]he misfortune is, that this conviction and this resolution never can have place, unless a man be, before-hand, tolerably virtuous” (E, “The Sceptic,” 171). In brief, for Hume, some natural virtues such as natural abilities and the qualities that make a great man are

not acquired through human effort; and to the extent that the remaining virtues are amenable to cultivation, deliberate self-cultivation is not a promising approach.

However, Hume allows that many aspects of human agency are amenable to the influence of various social factors. He makes a shift of emphasis on this issue from reflective self-cultivation to being shaped by social causes. We touched on this issue in the previous section in the description of Hume's position on the causal necessity of human affairs. Hume traces the diversity of human characters to "custom and education":

We learn thence the great force of custom and education, which mould the human mind from its infancy, and form it into a fixed and established character. (EHU 8.11; SBN 86)

The point to stress is that custom and habituation, as Hume understands it, is to be understood in terms of the operation of social causes rather than deliberate self-cultivation. For Hume, "[w]hether we consider mankind according to the difference of sexes, ages, governments, conditions, or methods of educations; the same uniformity and regular operations of natural principles are discernible" (T 2.3.1.5; SBN 401). An example is given in this context, "The skin, pores, muscles, and nerves of a day-labourer are different from those of a man of quality: So are his sentiments, actions and manners. The different stations of life influence the whole fabric, external and internal; and these different stations arise necessarily." Hume continues to explain, "Man cannot live without society, and cannot be associated without government. Government makes a distinction of property, and establishes the different ranks of men" (T 2.3.1.9; SBN 402).

Hume elaborates this view in the essay "Of National Characters." According to him, the causes shaping national characters can be divided into "moral causes" and "physical causes."

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 the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours, and such like circumstances. (E, “Of National Characters,” 198)

In particular, Hume stresses the effect of the constant operation of certain circumstances in shaping and sustaining character traits. He chooses two particular professions particular to his time, soldiers and priests, to illustrate this principle:

The same principles of moral causes fixes the character of different professions, and alters even that disposition, which the particular members receive from the hand of nature, A *soldier* and a *priest* are different characters ... and *this difference is founded on circumstances, whose operation is eternal and unalterable*. (E, “Of National Characters,” 198; the last emphasis added)

Hume further explains the operation of moral causes by focusing on one fundamental feature—the imitation and mutual influence among people. It is necessary to quote at length here:

The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions. Where a number of men are united into one political body, the occasions of their intercourse must be so frequent, for defence, commerce, and government, that, together with the same speech or language, they must acquire a resemblance in their manners, and have a common or national character, as well as a personal one, peculiar to each individual. (E, “Of National Characters,” 202–03)

The imitative nature of the human mind is emphasized here. Actually, imitation, like habituation, is consistently stressed in Hume's description of the formation of mental qualities of various artificial virtues. For instance, in the case of allegiance, Hume clearly indicates three possible causes in shaping the virtue of allegiance: interest, imitation, and

custom. Interested behavior produces “the instances of submission” and “the train of actions,” and then imitation and custom come into play to strengthen them into fixed dispositions (T 3.2.9.4; SBN 553). It is similar with the account of sexual morality: people who have direct interest in establishing this morality initiate it, and then “[t]hose, who have no interest, are carried along with the stream. Education takes possession of the dutile minds of the fair sex in their infancy” (T 3.2.12.7; SBN 572).

Distinct from the primacy of deliberate self-cultivation in ancient virtue ethics, Hume gives prominence to the formative effect of social causes, that is, causes that are beyond the reach of the individual’s will. An attendant implication of this shift should be clear now: ancient virtue ethics focuses on the perfection of elite individuals, while Hume is concerned primarily with mental qualities of common people and their contribution to the stability and prosperity of the whole society. Furthermore, if even the continual effort of self-cultivation by the elites cannot necessarily bring about the expected state of mind, there are certainly limits to the extent to which mental qualities of common people can be shaped and changed. Hume often indicates that it is impossible to change or correct anything substantial in human nature (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). As we have seen, the virtues with which Hume is concerned most to produce are the class of artificial virtues. They are much less demanding than the ancient ideal of human perfection. From the elite few to common people, from reflective self-cultivation to the collective process of social causation, and from the pursuit of human excellence to shaping social morality that helps secure peace and property, Hume’s account of virtues has turned away from traditional virtue ethics in many significant respects.

The Diversity of Ways of Life

By Hume's account, the shaping of virtue, to the extent that any virtue can be shaped, is essentially a process of social transformation. This understanding brings us to the connection between his theoretical account of virtue and his historical account of modern commercial society. His artificial virtues are inherently related to the liberal order, and the historical form that the liberal order took in Hume's time was the commercial society. Although we have examined his account of the shaping of the artificial virtues, this account is theoretical in nature and therefore is confined in subject matter to the underlying structure of human practice. As Hume knows better than most people, actual practice in history is much more irregular. This section turns to his social and historical account of commercial society to show that for Hume, liberal virtues are deeply rooted in the commercial way of life.

An important continuity exists between Hume's social and historical account and the perspective of ancient regime analysis. Best exemplified by Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, the regime approach defines the type of government by substance rather than by form. It is concerned with the question of who is to rule, but the point is not about power possession, but about what kind of human being or what kind of personality is to prevail in the city. Although they both hold a teleological ideal of human perfection, Plato and Aristotle tend to think that an actual human being can rarely achieve a perfect harmony of various qualities and virtues. In real life, people engage in different activities and focus on different goals, thus developing different characters and possessing different sets of qualities. The ruling group will determine what sort of

personality and activity is authoritative, thus determining the substantive life of the whole city. Understood this way, regime analysis focuses on qualities of character and the formative power of the way of life. It is essentially an understanding of politics in terms of virtues and the characteristic activity of a city.

Although Hume's focus shifts from politics to commercial society, and he contributes greatly to the rise of political economy, there is a strong element of regime analysis in his social and historical account.¹⁷ The connection between qualities of character and a way of life features prominently in his social and political analysis. He typically compares and contrasts the commercial way of life with other ways of life such as the ancient republic, medieval militarism, and the religious priesthood. Each way of life implies certain characteristic activities and certain classes of virtues. Compared with the class of virtues in commercial society, there is public spirit in the ancient republic; there are also military virtues and monkish virtues.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hume's sensibility and imagination had become increasingly sociological and economic, but compared with social sciences that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his perspective is still quite political. For instance, his comparison of the ancient republic and the modern commercial society treats them as two strategic options of state policy and assesses them in terms of their contribution to the state's power and greatness. In comparing the different effects on the size of population of the ancient and modern regime, he clearly follows the Aristotelian distinction between private household and "political customs and institutions" "to compare both the *domestic* and *political* situation of these two periods" (E, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," 383). Thus in Hume's discussion, both government and social and economic areas of the modern commercial society are put under the category of "political customs and institutions."

¹⁸ The political character of regime approach finds clearer expression in Hume's writings when he applies regime analysis to the states of modern Europe, "Where the government of a nation is altogether republican, it is apt to beget a peculiar set of manners. Where it is altogether monarchical, it is more apt to have the same effect; the imitation of superiors spreading the national manners faster among the people. If the governing part of a state consists altogether of merchants, as in HOLLAND, their uniform way of life will fix their character. If it consists chiefly of nobles and landed gentry, like GERMANY, FRANCE, and SPAIN, the same effect follows. The genius of a particular sect or religion is also apt to mould the manners of a people.

For example, let us take a look at Hume's comparison and contrast of ancient republicanism and the modern commercial regime. Hume is normally pictured as an ardent advocate of commercial civilization. This image is often contrasted to Rousseau's critique of commerce, and sometimes even to Adam Smith's ambivalent attitude toward the modern way of life. While Hume's embrace of commercial society seems more whole-hearted than Smith, he does not deny that the ancient way of life has its peculiar merits, which modern people cannot expect to surpass. Hume is a thinker with a powerful sense of complexity and concreteness. He is sensitive to tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities. Although he clearly thinks that within a commercial regime, "the natural bent of the mind is more complied with" (E, "Of Commerce," 263), he always stresses other possibilities because "man is a very variable being, and susceptible of many different opinions, principles, and rules of conduct" (E, "Of Commerce," 256).

He admits that the ancient republic, like Sparta, had a distinctive way of life that rejected commerce and luxury but nevertheless rendered the state powerful:

They were free states; they were small ones; and the age being martial, all their neighbours were continually in arms. Freedom naturally begets public spirit, especially in small states; and this public spirit, this *amor patriæ*, must encrease, when the public is almost in continual alarm, and men are obliged, every moment, to expose themselves to the greatest dangers for its defence. A continual succession of wars makes every citizen a soldier ... who fight[s] for honour and revenge more than pay, and [is] unacquainted with gain and industry as well as pleasure. (E, "Of Commerce," 259)

But the ENGLISH government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the ENGLISH, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such" (E, "Of National Characters," 207).

However, Hume stresses that the success of this way of life has much to do with “an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances” (E, “Of Commerce,” 259). It is not “the common course of human affairs.” It is impossible for modern states to follow ancient policy, since the ancient “principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions, and animate them with a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury” (E, “Of Commerce,” 263). Traditionally, “avarice” and “luxury” are conceived as cardinal vices. For Hume, the qualities or characteristic activities they refer to could be innocent or wicked, depending on specific conditions. Because the pursuit of interest and refinement of life could be productive in a commercial regime, “a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury” is precisely a class of qualities associated with the emerging commercial society.

For Hume, the two ways of life are mutually exclusive to a certain degree, but both have their own peculiar merits. He does not conceive of anything like a universal or rational way of life that would be a Hegelian synthesis of ancient and modern merits. Instead, he concedes that one cannot have it both ways. In the second *Enquiry*, this point of view is expressed quite explicitly:

Among the ancients, the heroes in philosophy, as well as those in war and patriotism, have a grandeur and force of sentiment, which astonishes *our narrow souls*, and is rashly rejected as extravagant and supernatural. They, in their turn, I allow, would have had equal reason to consider as romantic and incredible, the degree of humanity, clemency, order, tranquillity, and other social virtues, to which, in the administration of government, we have attained in modern times, had any one been then able to have made a fair representation of them. *Such is the compensation, which nature, or rather education, has made in the distribution of excellencies and virtues, in those different ages.* (EPM 7.18; SBN 256–57; emphasis added)

A similar observation is also made in “A Dialogue”:

[M]agnanimity, greatness of mind, disdain of slavery, inflexible rigour and integrity, may better suit the circumstances of one age than those of another, and have a more kindly influence, both on public affairs, and on a man's own safety and advancement. ...A degree of luxury may be ruinous and pernicious in a native of Switzerland, which only fosters the arts, and encourages industry in a Frenchman or Englishman. (EPM "A Dialogue" 40–41; SBN 337)

Thus, different qualities suit different circumstances. In a passage quoted earlier, Hume said that the different characters of the two professions, the soldier and the priest, are "founded on circumstances, whose operation is eternal and unalterable" (E, "Of National Characters," 198). In the following paragraphs, he refers to these "circumstances" as "the way of life" (E, "Of National Characters," 199). For Hume, certain qualities make sense only within certain ways of life. A way of life can be as large as a society's dominant arrangement, but it can also refer to a particular profession's distinctive life, like that of the warrior, the priest, or the philosopher.

Tranquilizing Passions and the Status of Avarice

As discussed in the previous chapters, there is a tension between naturalistic views and historical transformation in Hume's account of the artificial virtues. Now again Hume must balance the two aspects in his social and historical account of virtues. He claims that "the common course of human affairs" or "the natural bent of the mind," favors the modern society of commerce and civilization. On the other hand, he admits of alternatives and exceptions. For example, certain special circumstances could arise that would call for certain unusual qualities; or some significant character traits such as heroic

virtues or a noble spirit could prosper only under situations other than a commercial regime.

What is directly relevant to our topic is that in Hume's historical account, the distance between original human nature and commercial civilization seems much larger than it appears in his philosophical writings. Hume summarizes his narrative of the history of England as follows: "Thus have we pursued the history of England through a series of many barbarous ages; till we have at last reached the dawn of civility and sciences" (HE, 2:518). By his account, throughout this long period, the people stayed in a "barbarous" condition, and were essentially crude, ignorant, licentious, militant, and ferocious. Life was characterized by violence, insecurity, and misery. Although "The feudal government...was preferable to the universal license and disorder," this "strange species of civil polity was ill fitted to ensure either liberty or tranquility" (HE, 2:520). The "turbulence of the great," the "madness of people," and the "tyranny of princes" disrupted society by turns (HE, 2:174). Nobody enjoyed genuine peace and prosperity.

In contrast to this picture, Hume's account of the passions in the *Treatise* seems much simpler. It gives full significance to the natural passion of interest in the narrow sense, namely, avarice or desire of gain. As we saw before, this avarice or love of gain is described as an original passion of human nature and the most powerful and violent among all natural passions. He claims that

All the other passions, beside this of interest, are either easily restrain'd, or are not of such pernicious consequence, when indulg'd. *Vanity* is rather to be esteem'd a social passion, and a bond of union among men. *Pity* and *love* are to be consider'd in the same light. And as to *envy* and *revenge*, tho' pernicious, they operate only by intervals, and are directed against particular persons, whom we consider as our superiors or enemies. This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for

ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society. (T 3.2.2.12; SBN 491–92)

In the *Treatise*, Hume starts with this reductionist conclusion and moves to his account of justice or conventions governing property, eventually leading to his account of liberal institutions. However, in Hume's historical account, the alleged status of avarice as a dominant passion loses its naturalness and becomes the result of historical development.

By Hume's account, the prevailing qualities of people in pre-modern ages were never characterized by the pursuit of material interest. We have seen that people in the ancient republic were militant, public-spirited, and aspired to honor and greatness. In characterizing the Anglo-Saxons, Hume describes them as "an independent people, so little restrained by law, and cultivated by science" (HE, 1:161), and as "that military and turbulent people, so averse to commerce and the arts, and so little enured to industry" (HE, 1:166). He observes that "they were in general a rude and uncultivated people, ignorant to letters, unskilled in the mechanical arts, untamed to submission under law and government, addicted to intemperance, riot, and disorder. Their best quality was their military courage, which yet was not supported by discipline or conduct. Their want of fidelity to the prince, or to any trust reposed in them, appears strongly in the history of their later period; and their want of humanity in all their history" (HE, 1:185). Similar descriptions are found almost everywhere in Hume's historical narrative. Throughout his *History of England* the Scottish are described as "a warlike people" (HE, 3:124) and "that fierce, intractable people, unacquainted with laws and obedience" (HE, 4:38). Regarding England, Hume describes the people as "warlike" and the nobility as "universally seized with a desire of military glory" even in the early modern period (HE, 3:39).

The passion for seeking wealth does not seem to play a role in this picture, much less a dominant role. Compared with the violent and ferocious passions dominant in “those turbulent and licentious ages,” the passion for seeking wealth seems much more “civilized,” even if Hume speaks of it in the *Treatise* as “the most destructive passion.” Before avarice could become the dominant passion, the turbulent temper of the people needed to be softened, their warlike spirit needed to be pacified, and their ambition for power and honor needed to be redirected. In the light of Hume’s picture of the barbarous age, this was not an easy task. This concern about violence and license constitutes a major theme of Hume’s history of medieval England. Much of his attention is focused on “softening temper,” “moderating passions,” “tranquilizing passions,” and “humanizing temper.” Since the passions of those “barbarous” people always tend to be turbulent and military, “untamed to submission under law and government,” any attempt to construct a social order essentially involves taming violent passions. It takes much effort, long-time evolution, and a concurrence of many circumstances to bring about this change.

When he describes the character of Henry VII, Hume makes an interesting remark:

Avarice was, on the whole, his ruling passions; and he remains an instance, almost singular, of a man, placed in a high station, and possessed of talents for great affairs, in whom that passion predominated above ambition. Even among private persons, avarice is commonly nothing but a species of ambition, and is chiefly incited by the prospect of that regard, distinction, and considerations, which attend on riches. (HE, 3:73)

This observation indicates the predominance of ambition, the desire for honor, and the militarism of that time, but it also hints at the possibility of redirecting ambition toward other goals, seeking wealth, for instance.

In the same chapter, Hume offers a typical example to show how these warlike and turbulent people were redirected toward the commercial way of life. Henry VII had many laws against the engagement of retainers by the nobility, which was a disorderly practice deeply rooted in medieval England. Hume writes:

The encrease of the arts, more effectually than all the severities of law, put an end to this pernicious practice. The nobility, instead of vying with each other, in the number and boldness of their retainers, acquired by degrees a more civilized species of emulation, and endeavoured to excel in the splendour and elegance of their equipage, houses, and tables. The common people, no longer maintained in vicious idleness by their superiors, were obliged to learn some calling or industry, and became useful both to themselves and to others. And 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 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. (HE, 3:76–77)

In this case, the change of circumstances (or “the way of life”), induced or forced, played a dominant role in changing the habit and attitudes of the people concerned. Mere legal prohibition was not enough. The military and turbulent tendencies were themselves grounded in a certain way of life. There must be other ways of life to provide an outlet for those people who were seeking military glory.

A similar observation can be made with regard to the civilizing of Ireland as described by Hume. He remarks that in the profound barbarism of the Irish, “courage and force, though exercised in the commission of crimes, were more honoured than any pacific virtues; and the most simple acts of life, even tillage and agriculture, were almost wholly unknown among them” (HE, 1:340). Henry II conquered the island, but “the Irish, during the course of four centuries, remained still savage and untractable: It was not till the latter end of Elizabeth’s reign, that the island was fully subdued” (HE, 1:337–45).

However, “the most difficult task still remained; to civilize the inhabitants, to reconcile them to laws and industry, and to render their subjection durable.” James I abolished Irish customs and substituted English law in their place. He took the native Irish under his protection, and “declared them free citizens, proceeded to govern them by a regular administration, military as well as civil. ... Circuits were established, justice administered, oppression banished, and crimes and disorders of every kind severely punished” (HE, 5:48). Hume particularly brings our attention to the governance of the province of Ulster:

The Irish were removed from the hills and fastnesses, and settled in the open country: husbandry and the arts were taught them: A fixed habitation secured: Plunder and robbery punished: And, by these means, Ulster, from being the most wild and disorderly province of all Ireland, soon became the best cultivated and most civilized. (HE, 5:49)

Hume concludes, “Such were the arts, by which James introduced humanity and justice among the people, who had ever been buried in the most profound barbarism” (HE, 5:49).

Although this civilizing process was somewhat enforced by the English conquest, from this brief example we can learn about factors that can work to bring about change. Punishing crimes and reconciling people to law are certainly necessary, but also essential to this civilizing process is the introduction of people to a different way of life. Similar observations are scattered throughout Hume’s social and historical writings.

The Commercial Way of Life and the Liberal Personality

In the *Treatise* and the two *Enquiries*, Hume’s virtue theory is inseparably intermingled with his political theory. In these philosophical writings, his political theory deals with the fundamental institutions of a liberal society, focusing on the property order,

the rule of law, and limited government. For Hume, these institutions and the artificial virtues are different aspects of the same conventions arising from human artifice. Even if Hume's philosophical account of virtues and liberal institutions manifests a historical sensibility, it is an abstract theory concerning the underlying structure of liberal practice. It is only in Hume's topical essays and *History of England* that the social and historical context of the liberal society becomes the focus of attention. By Hume's account, liberal institutions are intimately connected with modern commercial civilization. Indeed, although he never explicitly says so, Hume's social and historical picture strongly suggests that the two sides, liberal conventions and the commercial way of life, are essentially inseparable.

If liberal conventions must be embedded in a substantial way of life, then the liberal order will be less natural, and it will be less plausible to associate it with pure reason or universal passion. Accordingly, it will be clearer that the maintenance of the liberal order must rely on particular qualities, and the significance of certain virtues for the liberal society will be greater than Hume's philosophical account suggests.

Certainly, in the *Treatise*, Hume already questions the reliability of the motive of "redirected self-interest" and stresses the weakness of human nature in resisting immediate temptations. He also notices the diversity of passions and the opposition between calm passions and violent passions. However, the *Treatise* focuses on explaining the general mechanism of the passions rather than representing the substantial and concrete content of various passions, or in Hume's own words, being an "anatomist" rather than a "painter." As a result, despite his assertion of the diversity of human passions, this diversity is unavoidably downplayed in his discussion. More importantly,

Hume simply starts with the passion of avarice to develop his account of liberal institutions and artificial virtues. As shown in the previous section, in the *Treatise* he explicitly understates the significance of many important passions (such as vanity, envy, revenge, etc.). Although Hume pays much attention to the ambiguity of the motive of self-interest, his discussion fails to do full justice to the complexity of the whole of human nature if assessed against his own historical writings. This reductionist tendency can also be seen from his account of calm passions. Hume provides a list of examples of calm passions, such as love of life, love of children, general concern with one's well-being, and desire of friend's happiness, etc. By contrast, regarding violent and agitating passions, he rarely indicates specific examples. If we compare this silence with the wide range of turbulent passions presented in his narrative of history, we can see that in the *Treatise* his silence helps to make the primacy of the calm passions appear more natural than they actually are.

In Hume's essays and *History of England*, the diversity of passions is pictured much more vividly. The peculiar tendencies of various passions are also stressed. Different passions and qualities are associated with different characteristic activities and different ways of life. Within the context of this wide range of passions and qualities, the universal dominance of avarice comes under question. To be sure, the diversity of the passions still does not get full expression even in Hume's historical writings. The Enlightenment idea of the opposition between barbarism and civilization features prominently in his account and more or less naturalizes the transition from ancient and medieval regimes to the commercial way of life. However, after this allowance has been made, Hume's narrative still shows that a great deal of transformation needs to take place

in human nature before avarice can become the dominant issue. Put another way, a few possible ways of life have to be excluded before avarice can become the original motive for the establishment of justice. Actually, it is precisely this sort of transformation—softening of temper and tranquilizing of passions—that becomes the theme of Hume’s account of history. It is also the necessity for this sort of transformation that explains why the liberal order must be grounded in the commercial way of life. To say that the liberal order is rooted in a distinctive way of life is to say that the liberal order requires the exclusion of some other possibilities of human nature and human life.

Following this line of thought, the liberal order will involve a wider range of character traits than the account of the artificial virtues in the *Treatise* suggests, and the formation and sustenance of these character traits largely rely upon the commercial way of life. For Hume, it is always difficult to attempt any sort of transformation of human nature because “a long course of time, with a variety of accidents and circumstances, are requisite to produce those great revolutions, which so much diversify the face of human affairs.” He continues, “It is his [the sovereign’s] best policy to comply with the common bent of mankind, and give it all the improvements of which it is susceptible. Now, according to the most natural course of things, industry and arts and trade encrease the power of the sovereign as well as the happiness of the subjects” (E, “Of Commerce,” 260). In considering the effects of “industry and arts and trade” on private and public life, Hume makes the following remarks, “Education, custom, and example, have a mighty influence in turning the mind to any of these pursuits. ... In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their reward, the

occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labour.”

Moreover,

The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become: ... Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both. Particular clubs and societies are every where formed: Both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behaviour, refine apace. So... it is impossible but they must feel an encrease of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment. Thus *industry*, *knowledge*, and *humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages. (E, “Of Refinement in the Arts,” 270–71)

When the tempers of men are softened as well as their knowledge improved, this humanity appears still more conspicuous, and is the chief characteristic which distinguishes a civilized age from times of barbarity and ignorance. (E, “Of Refinement in the Arts,” 274)

This is a new way of life. Hume is well aware of its revolutionary character, “A general revolution was made in human affairs throughout this part of the world; and men gradually attained that situation, with regard to commerce, arts, science, government, police, and cultivation, in which they have ever since persevered” (HE, 3:81).

Therefore, what is involved in the constitution of the liberal order is not merely the class of the artificial virtues but also a wider group of qualities and tendencies, which, combined together, give rise to a particular type of human personality. Hume’s famous “model of perfect virtue” in the second *Enquiry* can be taken as a good image of this liberal personality. The structural set of qualities that ideal agent possesses makes the best sense within the context of the liberal order and the commercial way of life.

He is a man of honour and humanity. Every one, who has any intercourse with him, is sure of *fair* and *kind* treatment. ... Whose assiduous application to the study of the laws, whose quick penetration and early knowledge both of men and business, prognosticate the greatest honours and advancement. ... In a circle of the gayest company ... he was the very life and soul of our conversation: so much

wit with good manners; so much gallantry without affectation; so much ingenious knowledge so genteelly delivered. ...That cheerfulness ... is not a sudden flash struck out by company: it runs through the whole tenor of his life, and preserves a perpetual serenity on his countenance, and tranquillity in his soul. He has met with severe trials, misfortunes as well as dangers; and by his greatness of mind, was still superior to all of them. (EPM 4. 269–70)

The regime approach in Hume's essays and *History of England* helps show the dependence of the liberal order on a distinctive way of life. It takes a peculiar human type to guarantee constant and strict conformity to general rules. Although Hume claims that the commercial regime is more natural than any other option, his discussion reveals how much transformation of human nature is required to establish that regime and the liberal order.

Conclusion

Considered within the context of the liberal tradition, Hume is widely regarded as a representative of interest-based liberalism, as distinct from, for example, Lockean, rights-based liberalism or Kantian, autonomy-based liberalism. This dissertation has attempted to revise or qualify this interpretation by demonstrating that in Hume's political theory virtues play a significant role in motivating compliance with the rules of a liberal order.

The discussion shows the importance of a distinction between interest as justifying reason and interest as motive. Hume's justifying rationale for liberal institutions is essentially based on considerations of self-interest. However, when it comes to the problem of motivation in relation to conforming to general rules, he has deep reservations about the role of self-interest. He denies that reflective calculation can become a constant and reliable motive in ensuring conformity to the rules of liberal institutions. For him, only a firm and unreflective disposition to adhere to the rules can serve as a reliable motive. A set of these dispositional tendencies form the core of Hume's liberal virtues.

Hume gives great importance to this contrast between reflective self-command and unreflective tendency. Given his theory of reason and passion, Hume cannot expect people to be always clear-headed and to be constantly calculating relative advantage. Moreover, although the system of rules as a whole promotes society's long-term interest,

a separate act of justice often inconveniences an individual. Deliberate calculation cannot invariably drive people to conform to the rules. Only a dispositional tendency can ensure strict rule-following. As motivations associated with artificial institutions, these virtues are unnatural to human beings. They result primarily from the habituation of rule-following behavior that people initially adopt through a sense of interest. Moral sentiment and other factors like education, social opinion, love of reputation, etc. help reinforce this habit.

A dispositional account of social causation and human agency in Hume's philosophy provides further support to this emphasis on the habitual feature of the liberal virtues. Hume claims that causal necessity, as concerns human affairs, is typically manifested as the causal relation between character and action and that the personality of a human being can essentially be equated with his qualities of character. In light of this understanding, we can understand those liberal virtues as causal tendencies to bring about certain effects. Regular rule-following behavior can result only from the constant and enduring dispositions of members in society. The stability of a liberal order can rely on neither voluntary commitment nor rational calculation; instead, it must depend on a set of unreflective tendencies widely possessed by the people. As Hume puts it, "No union can be more constant and certain, than that of some actions with some motives and characters" (T 2.3.1.12; SBN 404).

Furthermore, Hume repudiates the typical modern concept of autonomous rational agency and stresses the limits of voluntary cultivation of character traits. In contrast to the idea of self-determining subject, Hume's theory is fundamentally sociological and historical. By his account, people are essentially situated in the context of social

causation. Their qualities of character are shaped by the constant operation of certain circumstances, and these qualities ensure a certain regularity of action that makes a liberal order stable and sustainable. This account of liberalism differs fundamentally from those based on the concept of people living under divine order or based on the concept of rational and autonomous subjects.

Hume's account of the liberal virtues also differs considerably from traditional virtue theory. While traditional virtue theory is typically grounded in a teleological understanding of human nature, Hume's theory is based on a prudential account of liberal conventions. Therefore Hume's liberal virtues are not defined in relation to an ideal of human perfection or eternal salvation but in terms of their contribution to the stability of a political order, and to the securing of peace, liberty, and comfortable living.

This functional understanding of virtue is not unique; many modern accounts of virtue share it. What is special about Hume is the specific way in which he defines the functions of his liberal virtues. We can explore the relationship between liberty and virtue from many different angles. The approach varies depending on how one understands human nature, liberty, and morality. Hume is distinctive in that he simply puts virtues at the center of the liberal institutions, equating them with dispositional motives to move people to conform to liberal rules. In doing so, Hume unusually juxtaposes the self-interest motive and the virtuous motive and has to explain their relationship. The typical liberal idea of the self-interest motive, understood as involving autonomous rational agency and reflective calculation, conflicts with the dispositional view of the virtuous motive. Hume's notion of the self-interest motive, however, does not involve a detached capacity for reflective calculation; instead, this "sense of interest" is context-dependent,

and the interests in the concrete contexts are diverse and heterogeneous. This particularized sense of interest is more like a fixed tendency than a reflective calculation. As such it plays a major role in the formation of the corresponding virtuous motive and gradually gives place to the latter.

To push this point further, Hume takes the diversity of passions seriously. By his account, each liberal institution or practice functions to restrain or redirect some specific natural passions. Thus each artificial virtue results from the transformation of its corresponding passions. As a result, the artificial virtues are also diverse and highly context-specific. They cannot be subsumed under a single cardinal virtue, such as benevolence or altruism, as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson tend to suggest. Hume's artificial virtues are all particular tendencies and considerably context-dependent. They tend to lie beyond the simplistic opposition of self-love and morality.

However, the underlying premises of interest theory still operate to narrow the range of Hume's discussion. The moral and political theory in Hume's philosophical writings is based on naturalistic assumptions regarding the natural passion of self-interest and moral sentiment. His account of the artificial virtues is limited by these parameters and presupposes the natural primacy of the human need for physical security and material comfort or the natural dominance of the passion for interest. In Hume's essays and *History of England*, however, the situation tends to change. In real life, the wider range of human passions is hard to neglect, and the particularity of various ways of life is difficult to ignore. Facing the diverse ways of life in human history, Hume feels compelled to argue for, rather than simply assume, the naturalness of the liberal order. The liberal regime cannot easily accommodate certain set of noble virtues. Militant aspiration and

religious enthusiasm prevailing in ancient and medieval world also cast doubt upon the claim that avarice is a dominant and universal passion. Hume's stress on humanizing passion or softening temper, his association of the liberal order with the commercial regime, and his enlargement of the catalogue of liberal virtues, can all be understood as attempts to balance an interest-based liberalism and the historical complexity of human nature.

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