

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held at Senate House, University  
of London, on 26 January 2009 at 4:15 pm.*

VII—A COMPLEAT CHAIN OF REASONING:  
HUME'S PROJECT IN *A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE*,  
BOOKS ONE AND TWO

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In this paper I consider the context and significance of the first instalment of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Books One and Two, on the understanding and on the passions, published in 1739 without Book Three. I argue that Books One and Two taken together should be read as addressing the question of the relation between reason and passion, and place Hume's discussion in the context of a large early modern philosophical literature on the topic. Hume's goal is to show that the passions do not require government by reason, and to illustrate various ways in which the passions of social beings regulate themselves. The underlying theme of the first *Treatise* is thus a new theory of sociability: *sympathetic* sociability.

I

*A Treatise of Human Nature* was published in two instalments. The first two books, on the understanding and the passions, appeared in January 1739. The third book, on morals, came out almost two years later, in November 1740. In 1739 Hume had further books in mind, on politics and on criticism, but these never materialized. The Advertisement to Books One and Two, printed between the title page and the Introduction, called attention to the fact that '*The subjects of the understanding and passions make a compleat chain of reasoning by themselves*' (Hume 1978, p. xii).<sup>1</sup> '*I was willing*', Hume continued, '*to take advantage of this natural division, in order to try the taste of the public.*' The purpose of this paper is to consider what Hume might have meant by calling the subject of the under-

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons to continue to use this edition instead of the new Clarendon edition edited by David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (2007), see Harris (2008). I shall, however, use the Nortons' numerical referencing system to indicate the paragraph numbers of quotations from the *Treatise*.

standing and passions ‘a compleat chain of reasoning’ and a ‘natural division’. We are of course used to a *Treatise* that comprises three books and concludes with an Appendix containing critical reflections on arguments advanced in Books One and Two. I want to return to the *Treatise* as it first came before the public, without Book Three and Appendix, and to supplement our sense of the purposes of Hume’s earliest publication. Those few who have considered what Hume might have meant by his talk of ‘a compleat chain of reasoning’ have concluded that Hume’s intention was to advertise the success of his version of ‘the experimental method of reasoning’ as a means of explaining the operations of the mind in as parsimonious and elegant a manner as possible. Thus John Passmore suggested that ‘what in particular distinguishes [the subjects of the understanding and passions] as a single topic is the fact that in both cases association is the source of order and complexity’ (Passmore 1968, p. 106); and having asserted that ‘Book II of the *Treatise* is in many respects the most important for exemplifying the major themes of Hume’s philosophy’, Nicholas Capaldi says that ‘By its discussion of the mechanism of association [Book Two] serves as a confirmation of Hume’s explanation of mechanics of causal belief’ (Capaldi 1975, p. 130).<sup>2</sup> It is certainly true that Hume frequently draws attention in Book Two to continuities between the explanatory strategies deployed there and those used in Book One. My intention here, though, is to outline another sense in which Hume’s treatment of the understanding and passions constitute a complete chain of reasoning by itself.<sup>3</sup>

Books One and Two of the *Treatise* are not connected only by a single method of causal-explanatory analysis. Taken together they give an account of one of the oldest issues in philosophy, the relation between reason and passion. My suggestion is that this rela-

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<sup>2</sup> Capaldi says in addition that Book Two ‘serves as explanation for the concept of the self which proved so problematic in Book I’ and that ‘by outlining his theory of motivation Hume completes his project of undermining both the rationalist model in general and rationalist moral theories’ (Capaldi 1975, p. 130). He also points to connections between Books Two and Three. Still the most comprehensive account of these connections is Árdal (1966).

<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to downplay the significance of the fact that the associative dispositions of the imagination are at the heart of both Book One and Book Two. In both the Introduction to the *Treatise* and the *Abstract* the success of his anti-rationalist explanatory strategy is what Hume chooses to emphasize. My goal here is to highlight what is in effect a consequence of that success, one that has not been given due importance by scholarship insufficiently attentive to the variety of the contexts of the *Treatise*.

tion should be seen as a theme not just of §2.3.3, ‘Of the influencing motives of the will’, but of the 1739 *Treatise* taken as a whole. An additional way in which Books One and Two make a ‘compleat chain of reasoning’, on this reading, is that they circumscribe and define a discrete philosophical topic. What little evidence we have of Hume’s philosophical activity before the publication of the *Treatise* gives reason to believe that from an early date his reading and thinking had been taken up with the ability, or lack thereof, of reasoning to restrain and impose order upon the passions. The so-called ‘Letter to a Physician’ recounts the young Hume’s disappointment at his failure to improve his temper and will by means of ‘Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life’ (Hume 1932, vol. 1, p. 14).<sup>4</sup> That Hume had had such expectations of his philosophical reading does not mark him out as in any sense out of touch with the concerns of modern moral philosophy. On the contrary, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the publication of a large number of books devoted to showing how philosophy could help with living a happier and more virtuous life, by showing the way to better regulation of the passions through the proper exercise of reason. With a small number of exceptions, including Hutcheson’s *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions* (1728), this literature goes almost completely unread today, but, as Jane McIntyre (2006) has suggested, it is nevertheless an important part of the background against which Books One and Two of the *Treatise* should be read. It is likely that this literature shaped the expectations of readers of a book on the understanding and the passions, and that Hume knew that it would do so. The main theme of the literature on the passions was that the passions needed to be, not utterly suppressed, but rather governed and controlled by reason, and in particular by a reasoned grasp of what is really good and what is really evil. The 1739 *Treatise* presented, by contrast, a sustained argument purporting to show to be mistaken the whole idea that human nature is the site of conflict between reason and passion.

Hume’s answer to the question of how reason and passion are related was not merely the familiar sceptical claim that reason is, in

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent account of the circumstances (and probable addressee) of this letter, see Wright (2003).

fact, unable to conquer and subdue the passions.<sup>5</sup> On Hume's view the very idea of a conflict between reason and passion is mistaken. Feeling, or affect, drives the cogitative side of our nature just as it does the passionate side. What has always been taken to be a contest between reason and desire is in fact the interaction of a panoply of feelings, some vivid and pressing, others more elusive and reticent. The task for the analyst of human nature was now to register and explore this economy of feelings. In what follows I shall draw attention to the ways in which Hume presented the realm of the passions as structured in such a way as to make permissible talk of the *self-regulation* of the passions—though with the proviso that it be understood that the self-regulation in question operates in the context of the social realm taken as a whole, rather than within the breasts of individual men and women. The dominant tone of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century accounts of the passions was that of a Christianized Stoicism, and Hume's account of the reason–passion relation is correctly understood as a thoroughgoing rejection of Stoicism in all its guises, modern as well as ancient.<sup>6</sup> But contrary to what has been argued recently in some quarters, Hume's rejection of Stoicism did not entail an acceptance of the neo-Epicureanism of either Hobbes or Mandeville.<sup>7</sup> Hobbes had looked to a theory of absolute sovereign power as the only possible solution to the problems posed by human nature for peaceful social existence. In his most notorious work, Book One of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), Mandeville had constructed a sophisticated updated version of Hobbesianism, free of dubious talk of contract and consent, powered instead by pride and our susceptibility to flattery. Though the origins of political power are very different in Hobbes and Mandeville, for both writers such power is the only solution to the problems created for human beings by the

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<sup>5</sup> McIntyre shows that it is very common for those who argued that reason *should* be our guide in the restraint of the passions to insist on its inability to do so: see McIntyre (2006, pp. 202–4).

<sup>6</sup> Modern Christian Stoics took themselves to differ from their ancient precursors in so far as they rejected the idea that the passions needed to be completely extirpated. The passions, being part of a divinely fashioned human nature, were not in themselves either evil nor among the 'indifferents'. They were part of God's providence—but only so long as they were controlled in the right way.

<sup>7</sup> Hume's Epicureanism is a central theme of James Moore's work on the Hume–Hutcheson relationship: see especially Moore (1995). I express some doubts about reading Hume as an Epicurean in Harris (forthcoming).

nature of the passions.<sup>8</sup> What Hume did in Books One and Two of the *Treatise* was to propose means by which the passions might be understood to order and govern themselves to a significant extent, without superintendence by reason, and without superintendence by political authority.

## II

Salient in Book One of the *Treatise* is the extent to which Hume is concerned to demolish reason conceived as a faculty of governance and control. The *Abstract* of Books One and Two published in March 1740 makes it plain that, so far as Hume himself was concerned, the principal topic of Book One is a theory of belief, its nature, and causes. What a belief is, and how it differs from a simple conception, is, Hume says in the *Abstract*, ‘a new question unthought of by philosophers’ (Hume 1978, p. 652). The answer to the question is that what distinguishes belief from conception is a matter of *feeling*. The character of the feeling is hard to put into words—Hume experiments with strength, liveliness, forcefulness, vivacity, firmness, and intensity—but the important point is that belief is not, as had been imagined by both Descartes and Locke, the result of an autonomous act of judgement, but rather the product of idea-enlivening processes over which we have very little voluntary control. Part Three of Book One describes those processes in some detail, and its message is that what we might have fondly imagined to be the work of a special faculty of reason is in fact the product of association driven by habit and custom, a business that is in no significant way different in human beings from how it is in animals. The concern of Part Four is the shredding of the illusion that, even if this is how it is in ordinary life, still, it is possible at least for philosophers to counter the influence of habit and custom, and to restrain the belief-producing mechanism where its results are obviously absurd and untenable. Hume details the ways in which philosophy is overcome by what he often calls ‘nature’, but, contrary to what has

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<sup>8</sup> There are important distinctions to be drawn between the use made of ‘politicians’ in the explanation of the origin of virtue in the notorious ‘Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue’ and the much more complicated and subtle picture given in other parts of *The Fable of the Bees*. However, the Mandeville most often discussed, and abused, in the eighteenth century itself is the Mandeville of the ‘Enquiry’.

been a popular belief among Hume scholars ever since the work of Norman Kemp Smith, the conclusion is not that natural belief can save us from the scepticism into which philosophical reason plunges itself. As Wayne Waxman (1994) shows in a book which merits more attention than it has received, there is conflict and contradiction within the realm of natural belief itself. The feelings constitutive of natural belief do not constitute a harmonious whole. When, in the Conclusion, a rush of despair prompts Hume to exclaim that ‘We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all’ (Hume 1978, p. 268; 2007, 1.4.7.7), he means it. He means it no less when he says of himself that he is as result ‘ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another’ (Hume 1978, pp. 268–9; 2007, 1.4.7.7).<sup>9</sup>

Annette Baier has argued that Book One of the *Treatise* performs an elaborate *reductio* upon a particular conception of rationality, which she calls the ‘Cartesian’ conception (Baier 1991). Cartesian reason is solipsistic in the sense that it seeks to validate itself on its own, in silence, shut up by itself in the philosopher’s study. What Hume in effect shows in Book One, according to Baier, is that a move outside of the study, into the social realm, is necessary if we are to find a way out of the sceptical predicament. We fail to understand ourselves, and find ourselves ‘utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty’, while we restrict ourselves to the resources offered by ‘thought or imagination’ (Hume 1978, p. 253; 2007, 1.4.6.5); perhaps we will have more success when we take into account ‘our passions or the concern we take in ourselves’ (Hume 1978, p. 269; 2007, 1.4.7.8). Our passions lead us out into the social realm, as they make us aware of the beliefs and passions of others, and of the combination of threat and resource that those beliefs and passions represent; and in the social realm, according to Baier, we find the resources for reflective endorsement of belief. As a reading of the *Treatise* taken as a whole, Baier’s interpretation has much to recommend it. She captures well the narrative dimension of Hume’s argument, and the sense in which the end of Book One represents a crisis which the rest of the *Treatise* is designed to show us a

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<sup>9</sup> There is, of course, an extremely complicated debate as to how to read the Conclusion to Book One of the *Treatise*. I have merely indicated here how I think it should be read, and have given no argument to back up my preference for Waxman’s approach. For a different account, with references to much of the recent debate, see Garrett (2006).

way out of.<sup>10</sup> Missing from Baier's account, however, is full acknowledgement of the magnitude of the problem that Hume has created for himself as he moves on to Book Two, a problem that only comes into focus when one considers standard treatments of the relation between reason and passion. What Hume knew, and what his readers knew, was that the passions were usually taken to be a problem that required reason for its solution. How, without governance by reason, could the passions supply anything other than distraction and disturbance? Was the upshot of the destruction of reason described in Book One not bound to be, when combined with the unruliness of the passions as usually described, that we must be governed by power imposed on us, in the manner either of Hobbes or of Mandeville? Having staged the destruction of reason in Book One, in Book Two Hume carefully designs a theory of the passions to avoid this conclusion. And the crucial means to that end, as we will see, is the faculty of sympathy.<sup>11</sup>

### III

Hume's treatment of the passions begins where Hobbes's treatment had begun in *Human Nature*, with pride.<sup>12</sup> Paul Russell has drawn attention to what he takes to be important respects in which Hume's account of human nature in the *Treatise* as a whole is Hobbesian in inspiration, and one of those respects is the fact that 'Both Hobbes and Hume held that moral and political philosophy, if they are to advance beyond mere rhetoric, must employ the same methodology as that which is appropriate to the natural sciences' (Russell 2008, p. 68).<sup>13</sup> The differences between Hume and Hobbes are, however, as significant as the similarities. Hobbes's entire political philosophy is built upon the idea that the passions, especially but not only the

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<sup>10</sup> Which is not to say that there aren't problems for Baier's reading: see especially Broughton (2005).

<sup>11</sup> A full treatment of the 1739 version of the *Treatise* would include discussion of the way Hume's discussion of 'curiosity, or the love of truth' in the final section of Book Two appears to allude back to the ending of Book One and the claim Hume makes there that 'pleasure' is 'the origin of my philosophy' (Hume 1978, p. 271; 2007, 1.4.7.12).

<sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, Hobbes begins chapter IX of *Human Nature* with 'Glory, or internal gloriation or triumph of the mind', that passion which 'by them whom it displeaseth, is called pride: by them whom it pleaseth, it is termed a just valuation of himself' (Hobbes 1994, p. 50).

passion of fear, are so strong and so dangerous that self-government is impossible, so that they can only be controlled when all rights, except the bare right to refuse to do what will lead to one's own destruction, have been ceded to a sovereign power. In the *History of England* Hume remarks that 'Hobbes's politics are fitted only to promote tyranny' (Hume 1983, vol. VI, p. 153), and it may be presumed that he was able to see how Hobbes's theory of human nature had been designed to support his theory of sovereignty. Susan James (MS) has noted another respect in which Hume and Hobbes share a starting point: Hume's book on the passions begins in a version of the state of nature, in so far as it is a state without an authoritative power, in the form of a substantial sovereign self, able to impose order by exercise of the power of reason.<sup>14</sup> But where Hobbes looks immediately to political authority for a solution to the problems endemic to a state of nature, Hume outlines how the passions are forced by the ineluctable dynamics of social life to regulate themselves.

Properly speaking, of course, for Hume the very idea of a state of nature as imagined by Hobbes is a nonsense, 'a mere philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou'd have any reality' (Hume 1978, p. 493; 2007, 3.2.2.14).<sup>15</sup> Human life begins for Hume not in solitude, but in the family and in the tribe; politics is an invention to make it possible for collections of tribes to band together to fight common enemies. In the close proximities of family and tribal life it is difficult to be in any doubt as to the existence of other people along with their opinions and feelings about oneself, and this fact led Hume to what I take to be his principal insight as regards the economy of the passions, which is to say, his recognition of the ways in which passions are modified by the sense we each have of how we are viewed by others. Hume introduces this line of thought in his account of the love of fame, which he begins by noting that

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<sup>13</sup> The main argument of Russell's book is that what unifies the sceptical and 'naturalistic' aspects of the *Treatise* is 'irreligion'. (And it might well be that the prominence that Hume accords to pride is part of an anti-Christian agenda.) I do not find this persuasive as an interpretation of the larger goals of the *Treatise*. Indeed, I believe that the importance of an antipathy to religion can easily be exaggerated in accounts of Hume's intellectual career taken as a whole—but this is not a matter I can pursue here.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, the world of Book Two is an intensely social world. James's point is that in Book One Hume has undermined confidence in the possibility of believing in a self or subject invested with a natural power over the contents and operations of the mind.

<sup>15</sup> For a full development of this point, see Pack and Schliesser (2006).

... beside these original causes of pride and humility, there is a secondary one in the opinions of others, which has an equal influence on the affections. Our reputation, our character, our name are considerations of vast weight and importance; and even the other causes of pride; virtue, beauty and riches; have little influence when not seconded by the opinions and sentiments of others. (Hume 1978, p. 316; 2007, 2.1.11.1)

Pride and humility are responsive to and moderated by our sense of how we are seen by others, a fact that prompts Hume to introduce into his theory of human nature ‘that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own’ (Hume 1978, p. 316; 2007, 2.1.11.2). Much of Book Two is given over to how sympathy alters the nature and effects of our passions. Sympathy, Hume says, is the ‘animating principle’ of all our passions; ‘nor wou’d they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others’ (Hume 1978, p. 363; 2007, 2.2.5.15). ‘We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society’: our pleasures languish when we are forced to enjoy them alone, and our pains are all the more cruel and intolerable when they cannot be shared (Hume 1978, p. 363; 2007, 2.2.5.15). The intense sociability of human beings both enables and necessitates the regulation of the passions. Our passions do not exactly regulate themselves, then: the regulation happens in the context of a social system, in which my passions are regulated by yours, and yours by mine.<sup>16</sup>

Hume’s claim that ‘the minds of men are mirrors to one another’ takes us to the heart of his theory of the passions (Hume 1978, p. 365; 2007, 2.2.5.21). The emotions of others are reflected in our minds; the minds of others reflect this reflection; we in turn reflect the reflection of the reflection; and so on. Thus ‘those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees’ (Hume 1978, p. 365; 2007, 2.2.5.21). Humean sociability is rather more than a desire for the company of others. It is a concern for how others see us, a desire for their love and admiration, an aversion to their hatred and contempt. Hume works this through when he turns to our esteem for the rich

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<sup>16</sup> In developing this reading of Book Two I have been helped by, in addition to works cited above, Alanen (1998) and Taylor (1998).

and powerful. Riches are of course the source of a very basic satisfaction, in the form of the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life. But the rich man has 'secondary satisfaction' in the form of the 'love and esteem' of others; and this secondary satisfaction then becomes something further that is desired by those who are not rich but would like to be. That Hume chose the pleasures of wealth as his entry point into the social hall of mirrors is surely significant. For so long the desire of riches, or of luxury, had been portrayed as a socially disruptive force, something that corrupts virtue and leads inevitably to the weakening of the social bonds that give a state autonomy and the capacity for self-respect. Hume presents it instead as a means by which we are bound together into a community of aspiration. This is an example of the way the passions, as Hume understands them, draw us into the societal realm, by giving emotional reality to social relations, and especially to those relations that place us along the axis of 'superiority' and 'inferiority'.

Hume's account of passions dramatically reduces the extent to which the self is to be seen as inevitably at variance with the demands of social life. On Hume's view, the self is not riven by conflict, requiring control either by reason, along the lines described in the literature on the government of the passions, or by Mandevillian politicians. Instead, the self is a thoroughly social artefact, the product of the ways in which we are seen by others. Adam Smith would later portray other people as the mirrors in which we see ourselves: just as we cannot see what our faces look like without a mirror, so also we can form no conception of our characters without their reflection in the countenance and behaviour of those we live with (Smith 1982, p. 110). This image of Smith's builds on a mirroring process already outlined in Book Two of the *Treatise*. As Donald Ainslie (1999) has shown, what is presented in Book Two is the social basis of the very possibility of self-conception. The 'indirect' passions of pride, humility, love and hatred are mechanisms by which connections are forged between a person and those things that make him who he is: his virtues, his physical appearance, his possessions. We are proud of ourselves, and are loved by others, for some of these things; we are ashamed of ourselves, and are hated by others, for others of these things. In this way we acquire the solidity that we lacked in the Book One account of personal identity, restricted as it was to considerations provided by thought and imagination, the perspective given by the passions and affections put to

one side. In Book Two Hume talks repeatedly of our ‘intimate consciousness’ of the self, and it is inconceivable that he has somehow simply forgotten the opening moves of ‘Of personal identity’. Better to see him as talking in Book Two of a different person, not the person who so successfully eludes the grasp of introspection, but the person there upon stage of society, who is modest and has an upright bearing and owns fine suits of clothes, and who is proud of all of these things, and pleased by the approval he sees in the ways others treat him. Our grasp of who we are, Hume is saying, in the form of the kinds and degrees of pride and humility that we feel, is always determined in large part by our responsiveness to the sentiments of others. It might even be said that, for Hume, the truth is that we do not really know who we are until we know how others see us.

My suggestion, then, is that in Book Two of the *Treatise* Hume is outlining a new theory of sociability, what might be termed *sympathetic sociability*. Having gone to great lengths to undermine all confidence in the authority and power of reason in Book One, Hume turned immediately to the passions, that huge tract of human nature generally taken to be a site of disorder and disruption, and, as a result, to be in need of control and regulation by, precisely, the faculty of reason. Book Two, when seen in the context provided by the literature on the government of the passions, is striking principally in so far as there is no mention made of techniques by means of which the passions can be ordered and subdued. It seems to me almost certain that this is what would have been expected of a book on the understanding and the passions published in 1739. Hume was self-consciously refusing to tell his readers how to manage their emotions. His posture was that of the anatomist of human nature, openly and provocatively uninterested in the questions that almost all writers on such topics had taken it upon themselves to answer. This purely analytical tone is, indeed, as Paul Russell (2008, p. 63) suggests, reminiscent of the voice adopted by Hobbes in his treatments of the passions. But the substance of Hume’s account of the passions could not be less Hobbesian. Hume’s passions, far from making social life impossible, weave us into the web of social relations, so tightly that the self itself is not prior to, but rather a product of, life in society.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This is a very schematic and abstract claim, of course. In order to make it more plausible, detailed accounts would need to be given of the ways in the which the various particular passions contribute this socializing process.

This being so, the catastrophe visited upon the faculty of reason in Book One of the *Treatise* does not require a Hobbesian remedy: not Hobbes's own remedy, nor the updated Hobbesianism, Hobbesianism for an urban and commercial world, spelled out by Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees*. Means of government are provided by the passions themselves—which is to say, by the passions of others, of which we are always, through sympathy, very intimately aware.

#### IV

There is good reason to think that the greatest single influence on Hume's theory of sympathetic sociability was the treatment of the passions in Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité*.<sup>18</sup> Certainly sympathy is a notable element of Malebranche's account: he talks of a 'communication of the soul's passions' that works 'to join men together in relation to good and evil and to make them exactly like one another ... in their mental disposition', though he adds to this a series of physiological investigations entirely lacking in Hume (Malebranche 1997, p. 377). Malebranche adds that 'God has made us capable of all the passions that move us mainly in order to link us to all sensible things for the preservation of society and of our sensible being' (Malebranche 1997, p. 377). Moreover, Hume shares Malebranche's scepticism as to the capacity of either Stoicism or Epicureanism to cure the errors and disorders that our passions make us subject to; though, needless to say, he does not join Malebranche in looking to God's grace as the only true way of living in peace with the passionate side of human nature. There is a sense in which Hume on the passions is, as has been said of the treatment of causal power given in Book One of the *Treatise*, Malebranche without God. Certainly Hume shares Malebranche's interest in the alteration, alternation, and contrariety of the emotional domain. This becomes especially obvious in Part Two of Book Two, where to sympathy is added another important mental principle, the principle of comparison. This principle is introduced in the first instance in order to explain the contrary of pity, malice, 'joy in the sufferings and miseries of others, without any offence or injury on their part'

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<sup>18</sup> Those who have drawn attention to Malebranche's place in Hume's theory of the passions include Susan James (2005) and Amy Schmitter (2006).

(Hume 1978, p. 372; 2007, 2.2.8.1). We have a tendency to judge of objects by means of comparisons with other objects, most notably ourselves. And it follows that the happiness or misery of other people makes us reflect on our own happiness and misery, and to feel pain or pleasure as a result. ‘The misery of another gives us a more lively idea of our happiness’, Hume says, ‘and his happiness of our misery. The former, therefore, produces delight; and the latter uneasiness’ (Hume 1978, p. 375; 2007, 2.2.8.8). This is exactly the opposite of what would be expected from the principle of sympathy. Hume proceeds to use comparison to explain the passion of envy, and also the fact that civil wars are peculiarly intractable conflicts, in that, as Hume puts it, ‘any party in a civil war always choose to call in a foreign enemy at any hazard rather than submit to their fellow-citizens’ (Hume 1978, p. 379; 2007, 2.2.8.17). The superiority of one party to another is much more difficult to bear where there is an obvious relation between the parties—in this case, shared nationality—that facilitates comparison. Having introduced the principle of comparison, Hume focuses closely on the ways in which comparison and sympathy alternate in influencing the course of the passions.

Contrariety remains Hume’s main concern when he turns, finally, to an explicit treatment of the relation between reason and passion in Part Three of Book Two. We have been well prepared for what is, on the reading I am proposing here, the climax of the story that Hume is telling in the first published version of the *Treatise*. It is no surprise to be told that reason is the slave of the passions—what else could it be, given what reason had turned out to be in Book One, and given the centrality of the passions to self-conception as such in Book Two? Much more surprising is the way in which Hume characterizes the servitude of reason. His main point is not the manifold familiar ways in which the passions fail to submit to governance by reason. It is, rather, that what had, almost since the beginning of philosophy itself, been described as the conflict between reason and passion is in fact no such thing. As Hume says, ‘Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates’ (Hume 1978, p. 413; 2007, 2.3.3.1). The truth, however, is the supposed combat of passion and reason is really a combat between passions. Reason is not the loser

in the combat; it never entered the fray. What has been called the conflict between reason and passion is a conflict between passions that are ‘calm’, in the sense that they ‘produce little emotion in the mind’, and are as a result easily mistaken for determinations of reason, and passions that are ‘violent’ (Hume 1978, p. 417; 2007, 2.3.3.8–9). This reconstruction of what had usually been taken to be the central problematic of human nature is a remarkable moment in the history of moral philosophy. Hume’s topic for the rest of Book Two is the ways in which calm and violent passions succeed each other in the mind, both incited and abetted by reason, and never directly at odds with it.

There are two kinds of calm passion, Hume says: ‘either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetites to good, and aversion to evil, consider’d merely as such’ (Hume 1978, p. 417; 2007, 2.3.3.8). Among the violent passions are resentment, such as makes me desire someone’s harm and punishment, ‘independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself’ (Hume 1978, p. 418; 2007, 2.3.3.9), sexual desire, and a variety of other bodily appetites. Hume says he will consider ‘some of those circumstances and situations of objects, which render a passion either calm or violent’ (Hume 1978, p. 419; 2007, 2.3.4.1), but fails to make it clear whether particular passions are calm or violent as a matter of their nature, or whether particular passions can sometimes be calm, and sometimes violent. Neither resentment nor sexual desire are intrinsically violent; and yet neither seems to be among the calm passions as Hume has defined them. It makes most sense, I believe, to take Hume to be interested in the ways in which passions are violent at one time and calm at another, in alterations and reversals in which reason has little or no role to play. What Hume calls ‘strength of mind’ ‘implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent’ (Hume 1978, p. 418; 2007, 2.3.3.10), but it appears that there is nothing to be said about how one might ensure such a prevalence, given that, as Hume says himself, ‘there is no man so constantly possess’d of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the sollicitations of passion and desire’ (Hume 1978, p. 418; 2007, 2.3.3.10)—which is to say, more properly, the sollicitations of *violent* passions and desires. At the end of his account of the calm and violent passions, Hume admits that there is a certain mysteriousness to the whole business. There are so

many things that can turn a calm passion into a violent one that men differ in respect of how they settle the supposed struggle of passion and ‘reason’ not only from each other, ‘but also from themselves in different times’: ‘Philosophy can only account for a few of the greater and more sensible events of this war; but must leave all the smaller and more delicate revolutions, as dependent on principles too fine and minute for her comprehension’ (Hume 1978, p. 438; 2007, 2.3.8.13). This sense of the ultimate inscrutability of the ways in which the passions succeed and alter each other is another respect in which Hume’s text displays the influence of Malebranche and the Augustinian tradition.

The vocabulary of ‘calm’ and ‘violent’ passions is taken from Hutcheson (1728).<sup>19</sup> The usual recommendation as to how to ensure the prevalence of calm passions, explicitly endorsed by Hutcheson, was to concentrate on acquiring a secure and definite grasp of what is genuinely, as opposed to merely apparently, good for human beings. Hume depicts us as permanently liable to being distracted by comparison—evidence, as he puts it at one point, that men are not much governed by reason, and ‘that they always judge more of objects by comparison than from their intrinsic worth and value’ (Hume 1978, p. 372; 2007, 2.2.8.2). But as will become clear in Book Three of the *Treatise*, there is in fact no place for ‘intrinsic worth and value’ in Hume’s philosophy. There is for Hume no objective, in the sense of sentiment-independent, moral order able to serve as a means of ordering the passions and knowing which to indulge and which to deny. Hume will define the difference between virtue and vice in terms of our sentimental reactions, and allows that, were our sentiments different, so also would be the distinction between good and evil.<sup>20</sup> The only thing to set against the influence of comparison upon our judgements of value is sympathy itself, refined and rendered less partial by the adoption of a more general point of view on the matter in question. The process by means of which the inevitably variable nature of sympathy (variable, that is, ‘according to our

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<sup>19</sup> To be precise, Hutcheson distinguishes between calm *affections* or *desires* and violent *passions*. Christian Maurer draws attention to the Stoic provenance of this distinction in Maurer (2009, pp. 205–11).

<sup>20</sup> Hutcheson allows this as well, as he must, but is able to draw attention in addition to the fact that that our sentiments are as they are is evidence of divine benevolence. This prevents it being a matter of pure contingency that the moral sense approves of benevolence and condemns selfishness and malice.

situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam'd or prais'd' (Hume 1978, p. 582; 2007, 3.3.1.16)) is minimized is, it will be seen in Part Three of Book Three, the origin of all of our distinctively moral ideas. In this way Hume inverts the usual order of explanation: the passions give rise to morality, and morality is no longer a set of impersonal dictates to which the passions must accommodate themselves. That this is how things will turn out in Book Three makes it all the more important that the economy of the passions be shown to contain principles more or less sufficient to enable it to regulate itself.

Only 'more or less sufficient', though. The acquisition of 'greatness of mind', the temper of one in whom the calm passions prevail over the violent, is presented by Hume as something akin to a matter of luck. There are those in whom the violent passions will prevail, and the problems such people create lead Hume beyond the realm of the passions, through the conventions and institutions of justice, and into the domain of politics as the means of ensuring the hold upon the community at large of those conventions and institutions. It is important to recognize Hume's keen sense of the importance of morality, conceived of as a system of normative principles prior to and independent of politics, when it comes to the restraint of passion and consequent action. In a manuscript correction to a copy of the *Treatise* now held at the British Library, Hume added the following to his brief account of the moral obligation to justice in 3.2.2, 'Of the origin of justice and property':

Thus *Self-interest* is the original Motive to the *Establishment* of Justice: but a Sympathy with *public* Interest is the Source of the *moral* Approbation, which attends that Virtue. This latter Principle of Sympathy is too weak to controul our Passions; but has sufficient Force to influence our Taste, and give us the Sentiments of Approbation and Blame. (Hume 1978, p. 670; 2007, 3.2.2.24)<sup>21</sup>

Control of the antisocial passions is according to Hume ultimately the business of the magistrate. Such control, in the form of legally enforceable punishments, is necessary in large societies, where it can be easy to believe that no one will really suffer from a particular

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<sup>21</sup> In line with their editorial principles, David and Mary Norton insert this passage into the main text of their Clarendon edition of the *Treatise* without making clear that it is an unpublished emendation.

piece of injustice. At this point of Hume's argument, the stage appears set for a return of Hobbesian or Mandevillian ideas about the necessity of coercive power for the maintenance of social order. In fact, Hume's theory of politics is importantly different from the theories of both Hobbes and Mandeville—but this is a matter which cannot be pursued here. All that needs to be noted for present purposes is the fact that while there is a completeness to Books One and Two as regards philosophical method and, so I have argued here, subject matter, the chain of reasoning described is *not* complete in the sense that it describes a perfectly self-contained and self-regulating system.

## V

I have suggested that a book comprising accounts of the understanding and the passions published in the first half of the eighteenth century must have been read, and must have been intended to be read, in the context of a large literature on the government of the passions. Sometimes what is not said in a text is as significant as what is said. When one takes into account what books on reason and the passions normally looked like, there is in the *Treatise* a startling silence as to how the passions can be controlled. In his adoption of the pose of an anatomist of the mind, a scientist of man determined to leave to one side the practical concerns of the moralist, Hume would have seemed little short of irresponsible, as if he were consciously and perhaps even maliciously abandoning his readers to the bullying wiles of the passions—and, of course, when he was described by contemporaries as a 'licentious' writer, he was being he was criticized for just this kind of authorial irresponsibility.<sup>22</sup> Hume further violated the expectations that literature would have generated by assaulting the standing of reason in Book One, leaving the reader at the end of that book in the Pyrrhonist predicament, unable to find principled reasons to believe anything rather

<sup>22</sup> This line of criticism began with Hutcheson's complaint that Book 3 of the *Treatise*, in Hume's words, 'want[ed] a certain Warmth in the Cause of Virtue' (Hume 1932, vol. 1, p. 32), continued in the charge (to which Hume replied in the *Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*) that Hume was guilty of 'sapping the Foundations of Morality, by denying the natural and essential Difference betwixt Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice' (Hume 2007, p. 425), and was developed at greatest length by James Beattie in *An Essay on Truth* (1770).

than its contrary. Yet a careful reading of Book Two, such as been no more than sketched here, would bring out the ways in which the operations of sympathy allow the social system of the passions to be presented as able (more or less) to control itself. Such a reading would explore the numerous ways in which Hume drew upon the dynamics of social life in order show each of us as so caught up in the web of the passions of others that what we feel is to a significant extent determined by what we feel others feel about us. It would show how reason turns out to be largely irrelevant to the government of the passions and peaceful coexistence. Knud Haakonssen has reminded us that we have lost the ability to understand how in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ‘a concern with the possibility of social living and its political implications could be *the* fundamental problem in philosophy’ (Haakonssen 2006, p. 14). There is a sense in which any book about human nature written in the early eighteenth century was at the same time a book about sociability, its basis and its limits. The first instalment of *A Treatise of Human Nature* was no exception.<sup>23</sup>

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