

# **Political Philosophy: Two Interpretations**



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## **The Reconsideration of Liberty and Political Order in Hume’s Rejection of the Social Contract Theory<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** In this paper I will focus on analysing Hume’s rejection of the theory of the social contract, in the light of his major philosophical project of establishing a “science of man” based on the experimental method, which presupposed the reconsideration of human nature and especially of individual liberty and its relation with the legitimacy of the political order. Therefore, I will argue that following Hume’s empirical scepticism regarding the powers of human intellect, and his moral theory based on our sensibility and not on our freedom and will powers, we can better understand his objections against the theory of social contract.

**Keywords:** liberty, political order, Hume, social contract theory, artificial virtue

### **1. Introduction**

One of the most influential theories of political philosophy is the theory of social contract. While it was mentioned by ancient Greek philosophers like Plato (in his dialogue *Republic*), it gained its authority through the works of modern philosophers like Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, Jean Jacques Rousseau and others. Although, as we will argue in the last section, there are several versions of this doctrine, the main thesis defended by the followers of this theory is the statement that the political legitimacy of government is based on a contract signed by people who decided to renounce their

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natural state, characterized by liberty and right to self-determination, in exchange for the security and benefits provided by living in society.

This conception was meant to represent an alternative to the traditional view regarding the source of political legitimacy and sovereignty, according to which they were based on the divine authority. Hence, in the opinion of its representatives, the theory of social contract would play an essential role in the process of limiting the powers of the rulers in the benefit of the ruled<sup>2</sup>. As, Frederick Whelan rightfully observed „because it made the powers of the rulers conditional, the original agreement may at any time be invoked to justify resistance to government in cases of alleged abuse of power, beyond whatever legal channels the constitution may provide for the voicing of grievances” (Whelan 2015, 62).

This theory was based on a specific conception about human nature: men were characterised as rational creatures that are born in a state of perfect freedom and equality, enjoying the right to self-determination and property. However, this state of nature was described as presupposing a set of disadvantages in terms of securing the exercise of these rights, and generating prosperity through social cooperation. Consequently, people find it reasonable to abandon this state of nature and replace it with a state of civil society or political community, created by their consent (or manifestation of will) which generated the common will that is the foundation of political authority.

In this paper I will try to demonstrate that the conception defended by David Hume diverges significantly from this view regarding man’s nature, his epistemic abilities, and his moral and political life. Hume’s political theory is part of a philosophical project aimed at reconsidering the essential features of human nature. Therefore, in order to better understand his complex argumentation against the theory of social contract, I believe that we have to acknowledge the correlations between his objections and some of his epistemological, moral and political theses, which will be presented in the following sections.

## **2. Few remarks regarding Hume’s epistemology**

In the *Introduction* to his first philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume announces a very ambitious philosophical project: that of developing a “science of human nature” based on the experimental

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke argued that people are entitled to oppose the force of the prince when it is “unjust and unlawful” (Locke 1980, 103).

method, which was expected to put an end to the continuous controversy and confusion which, in his opinion, characterized the state of philosophy in that age. And, this very comprehensive science would incorporate Logic, Morals, Criticism and Politics, and would influence even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy (which was the usual term for Physics) and Natural Religions, since all of them have some dependence on this “science of MAN” built on the only solid foundation represented by experience and observation.

Therefore, he states: “For to me it seems evident, that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations” (Hume 1960, XXI). Moreover, he will add that, in this process, we cannot go beyond the limits of experience, and the attempt to discover the ultimate principles of human mind without relying on this authority would be “chimerical”. And, if this would be considered a defect of the science of man, it would be one that it would have in common with all the other sciences and arts.

Hence, Hume’s epistemology is directly connected with his conception regarding the impossibility of metaphysical investigation, in the traditional sense, which was supposed go far beyond the limits of human experience and discover the fundamental principles of reality. His theory of knowledge, developed in works like *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, goes hand in hand with his critique of the traditional metaphysics, and with his opinion that traditional metaphysical topics must be abandoned altogether and replaced by an investigation of the limits of human knowledge:

“Here indeed lies the justest and most plausible objection against a considerable part of metaphysics, that they are not properly a science; but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, being unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these intangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness” (Hume 2007, 7).

As a consequence the only way of freeing science from vanity or superstition is “to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding”, and underline from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is not fitted for “such remote and abstruse subjects” (Hume 2007, 8).

This is the reason why, he will argue that the powers of human reason are very limited and that this faculty has no other capacity than “compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience” (Hume 2007, 13). Hence, he will develop an empiricist view stating that experience is the only source and foundation for our knowledge. Therefore, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he will emphasize the fact that all the content of our mind is represented by “perceptions” which can be divided in two main categories, named “*impressions*” and “*ideas*”:

“Here therefore we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. (...) By the term impression, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned” (Hume 2007, 12-13).

The criterion on which the distinction is based is the *force* or the *vivacity* of the perceptions: the more forcefully they “enter” in our mind and the more lively they appear to us, the more significant they will be from an epistemic point of view (see Broughton 2006, 44-45). Therefore, a thought or an idea is understood as nothing more than a faint image or copy of an impression. And he will affirm the principle according to which the meaning of any given idea could be establish only if we would be able to indicate the corresponding impression from which it was derived.

Faced with the challenge of explaining our knowledge which transcends direct experience and observation and, in the same time, the orderly course and succession of our thoughts, he will mention three principles that govern the association of ideas, *resemblance*, *contiguity* in space and time and *causation*: “These principles of connexion or association we have reduced to three, namely, *Resemblance*, *Contiguity*, and *Causation*; which are the only bonds, that unite our thoughts together, and beget that regular train of reflection or discourse, which, in a greater or less degree, takes place among all mankind” (Hume 2007, 36-37).

The most important of them is *causation* because it is the foundation on which we base our knowledge of the external world. However, in his opinion, given the limited capacities of our reason, we have no access to the hidden powers of nature that connect every cause with its corresponding effect. Therefore, we have no objective knowledge

of this relation. The only principle on which we base this kind of knowledge is a *subjective* one, namely our *custom* or *habit* to expect after the appearance of one event, the appearance of its usual attendant:

“Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact, beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses” (Hume 2007, 32-33).

But, if there is only a subjective expectation to witness the appearance of the event we call “the effect” after the event we call “the cause” on which we base our knowledge of external world, how can we be sure that this so called “knowledge” is really useful and that it reflects things in an objective way, as they actually are and not as they seem to be? Hume doesn’t provide a clear and definite answer to this question. Sometimes, he seems to accept the sceptical conclusion that we do not possess an authentic method to that would allow us to transcend the information provided by direct observation. And this is precisely the path he takes in the famous *Conclusion* of the first book of his *Treatise* in which he acknowledges the fact that his analysis of causation left him with no means to justify the knowledge that goes beyond direct experience: “The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (Hume 1960, 269-270).

Nevertheless, he also suggest that the only salvation from this severe scepticism was *nature* which cured him from this “philosophical melancholy” by reintegrating him in the ordinary course of his natural and social life (dining, playing games with his friends, conversing and so on). He developed this line of reason in *An Enquiry of Human Understanding* where he stated that man is not only a rational being, but also a sociable and active being, and that his capacities for knowledge were designed by nature in such a way as to have a direct reference to his social and active features: “It seems, then, that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to human race, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much, so as to incapacitate them for other occupations and entertainments. Indulge your passion for science, says she, but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society” (Hume 2007, 5).

Therefore, he believes that even science and philosophy has to take into consideration this complex nature of man and to respect the following principle: “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (Hume 2007, 6).

Another argument in favour of this thesis according to which the real foundation of our knowledge about the world is the way in which it was designed by nature, is mentioned by Hume when he analyses the idea of necessary connexion:

“Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; and though the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with the other works of nature. Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species, and the regulation of our conduct, in every circumstance and occurrence of human life” (Hume 2007, 39-40).

This “pre-established harmony” is what explains the fact that human knowledge of the world works like an “instinct” that assures the survival of men. Moreover, it also explains, in a similar way, the survival of animals. In the section dedicated to the “reason of animals” he underlines the fact that animals learn from experience in a similar way as humans do. And, as it is impossible to think that this learning process is based on reason or argument, then it must be based on a kind of instinct which is much more efficient in securing their survival than the “uncertain” process of reasoning: “Nature must have provided some other principle, of more ready, and more general use and application; nor can an operation of such immense consequence in life, as that of inferring effects from causes, be trusted to the uncertain process of reasoning and argumentation” (Hume 2007, 77).

Consequently, in Hume’s opinion, human knowledge of external world must be conceived as a natural process similar to the instinct which explains the survival of animals. It has little to do with our reason and with our different individual cognitive abilities. These faculties are only capable of transforming the evidence provided by direct observation. In the next sections I will argue that Hume’s epistemological view had a significant influence on his conception regarding morality and political order and on his objections against the theory of social contract.



### 3. The Reconsideration of Liberty and Morality

Hume's epistemology to which I dedicated the previous section had a profound influence on his view regarding morality and liberty. His opinion on these subject matters is related with the theory according to which human reason has a very limited role to play in the process of knowledge. Hence, the role it has to play in our moral life is diminished in a similar way.

As, Jane McIntyre states, in her paper *Hume's "New and Extraordinary" Account of the Passions*, his conception on this topic is very different from that of his predecessors, especially when it comes to the problem of the relationship between reason and passions. Scholastic and modern rationalist thinkers emphasized the hierarchy of human mind or soul, with reason being the superior faculty which enables us to gain the control over our passions. Reason was conceived as being able to direct the force of the passions towards the good or the evil. So, these authors provided explanations of the passions influenced by their preconceptions concerning the role they had to play in our moral life. For example, she observes that an author like Malebranche tended to neglect the physiological account of passions because he believed that, without making reference to God's will, he will not be able to explain the relation between the passion and their corporeal causes (McIntyre 2006, 201).

However, for Hume, this relation seems to be described in opposite terms, if we take into consideration his famous statement from the *Treatise*: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume 1960, 415). And he justifies this inferior status on the fact that, in his opinion, "reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition", and is also incapable of preventing volition, or of "disputing the preference with any passion or emotion".

The aforementioned statement could induce the idea that Hume was nothing more than an "inverted rationalist", an interpretation which, as Jane McIntyre (2006, 212) rightfully underlined, would be wrong and would not account for his special account of the passions and their relationship with reason, based on his original conception regarding human mind. For him, our mind is not composed from a hierarchy of faculties, as in the scholastic description, and it is not a unique and unitary substance as in the Cartesian explanation. It is rather a compound entity made of different perceptions united by relations like resemblance, causation and sympathy. As,

McIntyre states, Hume describes the mind as a causal system and the passions as parts of this system (McIntyre 2006, 211).

Hume's account of the passions is directly linked to his epistemological distinction between impressions and ideas. Impressions are also divided in two categories: *original* and *secondary impressions*. Original impressions or impressions of sensation are those that arise in the soul without any antecedent perception. Secondary or reflective impressions are defined as being derived from the original ones, either directly or by the interposition of an idea. And, he affirms that in the first category we must include the impressions of the senses and all bodily pains or pleasures and in the second category all the passions and the emotions resembling them. The reflective impressions, or passions in the narrow sense, are divided into two types: those who are *calm*, like the sense of beauty and deformity, and those which are *violent* like love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility (Hume 1960, 275-276). And, he adds another distinction between *direct* passions that derive immediately from good and evil, pain or pleasure, a category which includes desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear, and *indirect* passions, like pride or love resulting from the association of the idea of the cause of a pleasurable sensation with the idea of oneself or another person (Pitson 2006, 210)

The fact that Hume makes human reason the "slave" of our passions, could be used to support the belief that passions are the principles which govern our mind and our moral life. And this seems to be the path he takes when he affirms that: "If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, it were in vain to take such pains to inculcate it; and nothing would be more fruitless than that multitude of rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound" (Hume 1960, 457). And, he adds that morals excite passions, and consequently produces or prevents actions, a result that reason, which is presented as an "inactive principle", is never able to achieve. The only thing it can do is to either excite a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it, or to discover the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.

But, then Hume would have to answer some question which can be seen as parallel to the ones we mentioned in the section dedicated to his epistemology: How will he justify the supremacy of passions for our moral life? Are individual passions capable of directing the course of our actions without conflicting with one other and transforming our behaviour into a chaotic succession of actions? Or are they part of some kind of system or hierarchy which will explain our organised course of action?

As McIntyre notices, in Hume's conception, passions are not organized hierarchically and are not capable to act as individual and autonomous rulers of human minds. And the reason for this is that the indirect passions, like pride and love, which are very important for our moral life, are social: "We are influenced by the passions of others through sympathy, and this is the most distinctive feature of Hume's account of the government of the passions" (McIntyre 2006, 211-212).

Another obvious candidate for the principle that would be capable of inducing order into our course of actions is our free will. However, Hume's explanation of human will is also an original one, and, taking into consideration all the theses mentioned above about his epistemology and account of human mind, this explanation is particularly vulnerable to the problem of reconciling liberty and determinism. As Tony Pitson underlines in his article *Liberty, Necessity and the Will*, Hume has to face this problem, given the fact that he expressed his intention to establish a science of man by applying the experimental method: "For in attempting thus to 'anatomize human nature' Hume is assuming that it is possible to provide causal explanations of the occurrence of mental states, or 'perceptions,' and thereby exhibit the principles governing our mental lives. In what sense can we be considered free and responsible agents if the states of mind from which our actions proceed occur in accordance with the laws of human nature which Hume is seeking in the *Treatise* to identify?" (Pitson 2006, 216).

Moreover, Pitson emphasizes the fact that, for Hume, the *will* itself is classified as an *impression of reflection* and although it is not properly speaking a passion, it shares with direct passions the feature of being an immediate effect of pain and pleasure, and shares with indirect passion like pride, humility, love and hatred the fact that is indefinable because it consists in a simple and unanalysable impression (Pitson 2006, 217). And, indeed, this is the way he defines human will in the *Treatise*: "I desire it may be observed, that 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* (Hume 1960, 399)". And he adds that this impression, like the preceding ones of pride and humility, love and hatred, is impossible to define, and it needs no other description.

In this description the will is portrayed as a type of perception we encounter in the human mind or, more specifically, an impression that everybody feels when they consciously move their body or the perceptions of their mind. But, from other explanations of the will we notice that Hume

had also in mind something more than a simple impression. For example, in his characterisation of the liberty presented in his work *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he refers to the *power* of acting or not acting in accordance with the determinations of the will:

“By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains” (Hume 2007, 69).

However, this power to decide whether to act or to abstain from acting should not be understood in Cartesian terms as an essential attribute of the human soul conceived as a substance in itself. From the characterisation of human mind described above, we can acknowledge the fact that, in Hume’s opinion, we cannot speak about our mind as a metaphysical entity, or as a substantial and unitary self. Moreover, this liberty should not be represented as an absolute privilege that humans would have to select a specific course of action or thought without the interference of other causes. The fact that human will is characterized by liberty does not mean that we are free from any other restrictions, and that our decisions are made absolutely without any determinations.

And, in order to justify this thesis he uses the scholastic distinction between *liberty of spontaneity* and *liberty of indifference*. The first type is opposed to violence, therefore anyone who is not in chains or the victim of a violent constraint that would restrict his ability to choose a course of action could be considered free. The second type of liberty is the one who presupposes a negation of cause and necessity. But, in Hume’s conception, *human freedom could be characterised only as liberty of spontaneity*, and this is the type of freedom we would be entitled to preserve. The feeling that our liberty should be independent from any cause or determination is derived from confusion between the two kinds of liberties and from a “false sensation” of indifference. This sensation comes from the fact that we can imagine we could have choose to act differently and that our will is subject to no influence. Nevertheless, the only perspective that counts is not this false experience of indifference: it is the perspective of the more objective spectator who will be able to infer our action from our motives and from our character (Hume 1960, 407-408). However, if it is understood in the right way, as liberty of spontaneity, our freedom is compatible with other determinations, as those deriving from our character, passions and affections:

“It will be equally easy to prove, and from the same arguments, that liberty, according to that definition above mentioned, in which all men agree, is also essential to morality, and that no human actions, where it is wanting, are susceptible of any moral qualities, or can be the objects either of approbation or dislike. For as actions are objects of our moral sentiment, so far only as they are indications of the internal character, passions, and affections; it is impossible that they can give rise either to praise or blame, where they proceed not from these principles, but are derived altogether from external violence” (Hume 2007, 72).

Hence, I believe that the conception he is advancing here presupposes a significant *reconsideration* of the concept of liberty, with considerable consequences not only for his moral theory, but, as I will argue in the next section, also for his political view and his critique of the theory of social contract. For example, when it comes to its conception regarding the importance of the liberty of human action for the possibility of our moral judgements about them, he argues that his view according to which actions have a “constant union with our motives, tempers and circumstances” (Hume 1960, 400), is much more plausible than the doctrine of free will understood as independent from any other determinations. And, the reason for this is the fact that, this latter doctrine, transforms the actions of an individual in “perishing” and “temporary” events which have no real connection with something more stable from that person’s nature, like his disposition or character, which would make him responsible for that action:

“Actions are, by their very nature, temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour, if good; nor infamy, if evil. The actions themselves may be blameable; they may be contrary to all the rules of morality and religion: But the person is not answerable for them; and as they proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable and constant, and leave nothing of that nature behind them, it is impossible he can, upon their account, become the object of punishment or vengeance” (Hume 2007, 71).

But, as Tony Pitson (2006, 220-222) argues, this conception concerning liberty of spontaneity rises some questions about whether or not this doctrine is consistent with human agency and with moral responsibility for our actions. If his compatibilist view really states that our freedom is compatible with the universal causation and necessity

which applies not only to the physical world, but also to our will, how can he speak about our actions as being voluntary?

In Pitson's opinion, in order to understand Hume's position, we must realize that his theory about necessity is different from the traditional one. As we already mentioned in the previous section, he does not believe that we have access to a real necessary connection between cause and effect. For Hume, the "necessary connection" is nothing more than a *constant union* of the objects and the *inference* we derive from that union. Therefore, even in the natural world, there is no strictly determined and inescapable order of things as classical fatalist and determinist authors would sustain. As a consequence, the fact that our will is determined by our motives, dispositions or character doesn't seem to be inconsistent with the doctrine of necessity explained in these terms: "Once it is recognized that all that can be meant by 'necessity' in this context is that there is a constant conjunction of action and motives (with the consequent inference from one to the other), then it is evident that this is reflected in our ordinary reasoning about actions and their causes" (Pitson 2006, 222).

However, if we analyse the theory of liberty as spontaneity, it seems to be still vulnerable to some serious objections. As Pitson suggests, if this theory is to be compatible with moral responsibility, it must presuppose not only the *negative* condition, consisting in the absence of constrain, but also the *positive* condition, that our actions are caused by our volitions or, in other words, a "minimal notion of agency". And, he asks if this capacity of acting in accordance with the choice we made, but also in accordance with the alternative choices we did not make, doesn't presuppose something like the liberty of indifference.

In response, Pitson criticizes this suggestion by noticing that this objection is based on an explanation of volition that involves rational consideration for the action, an explanation that Hume rejects in favour of the one according to which volition is the immediate product of passion rather than reason (Pitson 2006, 223). But, then we would have to ask if this doesn't take us to the place we started: if volition is the product of passion, if it is determined by character and motives, which are also determined by "physical" and "moral" causes, what will be the contribution of the agent that will justify his moral responsibility? Wouldn't Hume's theory be faced with a problem similar to the theological problem he identifies in the work of Malebranche<sup>3</sup> who sustained that God

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<sup>3</sup> In his work *De la recherche de la vérité (The Search after Truth)*, Malebranche affirms: "car c'est par l'action continuelle de Dieu que nos volontés sont suivies de tous les mouvements de notre corps qui sont propre pour les exécuter, et que les mouvements

is the author of our volitions and therefore is the only responsible agent? Wouldn't a secularized version of this argument affect Hume's theory implying that according to it we are not responsible agents at all? Addressing these questions Pitson argues that Hume's response could mention the sentiments of approbation or blame that arise from the natural and immediate view of each other's characters, dispositions and actions, and that these statements would constitute a "*naturalistic understanding of the notion of responsibility*" which would be not only compatible with necessity, but would actually require it (Pitson 2006, 225-226).

Unfortunately, Pitson does not develop in his article this insightful solution, although he mentions it again in the final part of his text, stating that Hume's *naturalistic* account of attribution of responsibility makes reference to the moral sentiments that arise when we draw inferences from people's actions to their mental causes, and adding that: "Since these sentiments arise only as a result of our ability to make such inferences, this evidently presupposes both the doctrine of necessity, as Hume understands it, as well as liberty of spontaneity" (Pitson 2006, 228). However, in my opinion, this promising solution needs further investigation. Because we have to ask how would this naturalistic view make human agency compatible with necessity without offering an answer to the aforementioned question: who or what will be the author of our volitions?

In my opinion, the comparison with his account of the necessary connection between the events in the natural world doesn't seem to help very much. The reason for this is the fact that the subjective habit to expect the event we call "the effect" after its usual attendant we call "the cause" was not presented as a voluntary decision from our part, but, as a type of natural reaction which, as I mentioned in the previous section, was established by nature for our survival. So, the inference that accompanies the conjoined occurrence of the two events should not be conceived as a creative and free act of our thought, but more as an instinct. However, if this is the type of "inference" that would prove that human liberty (as spontaneity) is compatible with necessity, I believe that it cannot be used to give an explanation for the idea of human agency and moral

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de notre corps, lesquels s'excitent machinalement en nous par la vue de quelque objet, sont accompagnés d'une passion de notre âme qui nous incline à vouloir ce qui paraît alors utile au corps" (Malebranche 1958, 128). The English translation is: "For it is through this continuous action by God that our volitions are followed by all those movements in the body designed to carry them out, and that the movements of our body that are mechanically excited in us at the sight of some object are accompanied by a passion of our soul that inclines us to will what seems to be useful to the body" (Malebranche 1997, 338)

responsibility, because, it is only a natural reaction and not a voluntary act. And, Hume explicitly assumes this position in his work *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* when he affirms:

“This belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent” (Hume 2007, 34).

So, Hume seems to be consistent with his principle according to which, as it is “universally allowed”, nothing exists without a cause of its existence, a principle which applies not only to the natural world, but also to the moral world. But, this talk about the “natural instinct” that would determine the way in which we evaluate the behaviour of our fellow men, does seem to make his theory vulnerable to a similar problem to the one mentioned against Malebranche: if our volitions could be portrayed as nothing more than natural reactions, then nature will be the real “agent” and not us. Hence, his theory doesn’t seem to fare any better than the one supported by Malebranche: the only difference is the substitution of God with nature.

However, I believe that Hume could answer that this only difference would be an essential one. Firstly, human natural reactions are familiar to everybody and they can be the object of observation and experience, which we cannot say about God influence over our volitions. Secondly, the type of agency Malebranche attributes to God cannot be shared with human agency: God is represented as being the only person who acts and the humans as nothing more than his opportunities for action. But, natural “agency” could be shared with human agency in the following way: nature doesn’t only act for us and through us, but also *in us* and *by us*. Our human nature (which would include our character, desires and so on) could be represented as determining our course of action without really constraining our will, and therefore, allowing for our liberty as spontaneity to manifest.

But, this answer opens another question concerning the foundation on which we could base our moral judgements: if our volitions could be interpreted as our natural reactions to certain motives, traits of character and other mental causes, how can we distinguish between good and bad “choices” to act or to abstain from acting? What will be the standard of our moral judgements if, by hypothesis, all our reactions are “natural”? I



present Hume's answer in the next section dedicated to his view regarding the "invention" of artificial virtues and the development of political order.

#### **4. The artificial virtues and the reconsideration of political order**

Remaining faithful to his view according to which the role of reason in our cognitive and moral life is a minor one, Hume based his moral theory on sentiment, namely on the feelings of approval or disapproval people feel when they contemplate the traits of character displayed by others. Approval is a type of pleasure and disapproval is a type of pain, and they could be said to represent the passions which drive humans and "turn the things or states of affaires which are objects of our desire into objects to be sought" (Karlsson 2006, 236). In other words, these emotions are the ones which motivate us to act in a way or another, and not our reason which is characterised as "inert". Moreover, he insists that these emotions don't have any representative content, they are not the copy of another existence and, therefore, the moral judgements based on them cannot be considered as true or false (Hume 1960, 458).

In her article *Hume's Artificial and Natural Virtues*, Rachel Cohon affirms that Hume could be considered a virtue ethicist if we take into consideration that, in his opinion, the primary object of moral evaluation are people's traits of character and that he explains the nature of a good action as something a virtuous agent would do. Nevertheless, she thinks that his theory diverges from those of Aristotle and of contemporary neo-Aristotelians who define virtue as character traits that play an essential role in the flourishing of human life: "Hume, by contrast, defines a virtue as a quality of the mind that evokes the feeling of approval in an observer when it is contemplated in an unbiased way" (Cohon 2006, 257).

Cohon analyses Hume's conception by comparing it, on one hand, with the conception of Hobbes who sees morals as conventional, and, on the other hand, with the conception defended by Locke and Hutcheson, who believed that morals are natural. In her opinion, Hume takes the intermediate position maintaining that some important virtues are natural while others, equally important, are socially invented or artificial.

From the characterisation offered above, I believe we must notice that for Hume all our moral life is *social* in a broad sense of this term, and as a consequence, all our virtues could be said to be social, if we take into consideration the fact that our moral feelings and moral judgements presuppose a social context: we experience the feelings of approval or

disapproval only from the perspective of a observer who witnesses another's man action and takes it as a sign of his character trait. However, Hume distinguishes this kind of social environment which is specific to our natural life in small groups or families, from the "artificial" social environment which presupposes life in large and politically organized societies. In this sense he states in his *Treatise*:

"I have already hinted, that our sense of every kind of virtue is not natural; but that there are some virtues, that produce pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance, which arises from the circumstances and necessity of mankind. Of this kind I assert justice to be; and shall endeavour to defend this opinion by a short, and, I hope, convincing argument, before I examine the nature of the artifice, from which the sense of that virtue is derived" (Hume 1960, 477).

So, in his opinion, although our moral life presupposes the social context as an essential condition, there is a significant difference between the form it takes in small groups or families and the one it manifests in large political communities.

And this difference is the base for his distinction between *natural* and *artificial virtues*. As, Rachel Cohon argues, natural virtues are more refined and completed forms of natural human sentiments, which include virtues of attachment and devotion to particular individuals (like our children) and therefore they are characterised by partiality. In her opinion, natural virtues could be classified in three categories: virtues of the greatness of mind, based on pride and humility; virtues of goodness or benevolence, based on love; and virtues that are natural abilities like intelligence, humour, calm self-interest and so on. The artificial virtues are traits of character we need for successful *impersonal* cooperation, and among them he includes justice, or honesty with respect to property, fidelity to our promises, international justice, allegiance to one's government, chastity, modesty and good manner (Cohon 2006, 269).

Another very important concept for his moral theory is *sympathy* understood as the "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 1960, 316). As, Cohon explains it, sympathy means that our emotions are *contagious*: when we observe the expressions of another's man passion the idea of that passion is brought to our mind because of the similarity between us. And, this idea of his passion present in my mind would make me experience his passion, but with a lower intensity (Cohon 2006, 258).

Faced with the problem of explaining why people's assessment of the traits of character of an agent tend to be uniform, Hume stated that they do not make their evaluation from their own perspective, but from a *common point of view* composed from the perspective of the individual whose character is examined and those who are affected by his actions which constitutes the standard of virtue and morality:

“But we shall easily satisfy ourselves on this head, when we consider, that every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. (...) And tho' such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own, yet being more constant and universal, they counter-balance the latter even in practice, and are alone admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality.” (Hume 1960, 591).

However, as Cohon underlines, this conception regarding the standard of our moral evaluations raises the question if Hume's conception allows for a normative perspective. Because, if in our evaluation we apply the common point of view of what the individuals affected by someone's behaviour really feel, then we have to ask if there is any way in which we can criticize their view in light of what they *should* have been feeling: “He leaves us with a tantalizing ambiguity: whether all evaluations or norms are in his view reducible to our approval and disapproval, or whether instead there is some standard by which our approvals (our moral judgements themselves) can be justified or corrected” (Cohon 2006, 271).

Sympathy also plays a central role in the “invention” of artificial virtues. This process is a very interesting one, and has a special bearing for the topic of his attitude towards social contract. Cohon underlines the fact that Hume wants to explain how free, unsubordinated and un-coerced individuals could come to develop artificial virtues, like justice. And the explanation is along the following lines: The motive of our actions performed in accordance with artificial virtues cannot be our natural approval of that action, because it would mean to reason in a vicious circle: “the agent is moved to act by his own approval of what moves him to act” (Cohon 2006, 261). Moreover, as Hume argues in his *Treatise*, there is no universal natural affection or sympathy to mankind that would explain the fact that we feel that we have to pay our debts or keep our

promises (Hume 1960, 482). So, the motive of the action shouldn't be natural, but artificial, arising from conventions and education.

The way in which conventions are generated has to do with people's need to cooperate for their survival and prosperity. The experience of small group cooperation tells them that a greater prosperity could be achieved by cooperating with non-intimates. But, this type of cooperation gives rise to conflict because of the moderate scarcity of resources. As a consequence, men create rules of ownership in order to satisfy their avidity for possession, to avoid conflict and to maintain social cooperation. However, these rules develop gradually from an original primitive system of signalling our intentions to refrain from taking the possession of other man, with the condition that he does the same, into a more elaborate set of conventions, about the way goods may come into possession initially and may be transferred by consent.

Cohon, notices that, originally, greed and self-interest motivates the invention of property, but once the convention is present it will be "moralized" by other forces like education, and latter, in political communities, by the rules introduced by politicians. Nevertheless, she insists that the creation of this convention does not depend on any promise or contract: "Its concept of convention is of an informal practice of mutual compromise for mutual advantage that arises incrementally and entirely informally, without the use of central authority or force. The process of moralization likewise proceeds in small, spontaneous steps" (Cohon 2006, 263-264).

Therefore, in Hume's conception our social life does not have a clear origin: there is no moment in which society could be said to be "invented" by means of a promise or of a contract signed by individuals for their mutual benefits. In his opinion, people always lived in society: first in natural communities like small groups or families, and later in large political communities. But the transition from one stage to the other was performed gradually, in small steps, without any original founding agreement between autonomous and free individuals. In this sense he affirmed in his essay *Of the Original Contract*: "Again; were all men possessed of so perfect an understanding, as always to know their own interest, 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" (Hume 1994, 192). In Hume's view, history demonstrates that the origin of the political society are much less clear, and even if the consent of the people could be one of its sources (and the best one), there are also

other alternative foundations that must be taken into consideration. And conquest and usurpation are more probable foundations than consent.

### 5. Hume's critique of the social contract

In order to understand Hume's objections against contractarianism, we have to take into consideration the fact that his political and moral views are part of his major project of establishing a science of man on the basis of experimental method. This is the reason why, as we mentioned in the previous sections, he expresses his scepticism about the capacity of human reason to determine something significant about our nature by transcending the limits of experience. Therefore, he does not accept that the origins of social life and government could be discovered by the use of our reason which would speculate about the possible way in which social life could be generated. Hence, only our experience could provide the relevant and trustworthy information.

However, acknowledging the fact that, when it comes to social and political life, it is not possible to produce and to premeditate experiences in the same manner as in the natural sciences, Hume affirms in his *Treatise* that in the science of man the experiences would be provided by the "cautious observation of human life". And, he adds that we must take these experiences "as they appear in the common course of the world" (Hume 1960, XXIII). Therefore, Hume's advice is to study the real history and the real political life in order to gather the relevant information. And, this is precisely what he will do when he will study historical works and will write the monumental *History of England*, which was considered by most of his contemporaries to be his major work. So, in Hume's view, the work of a political philosopher must rely on the historical investigation concerning real social and political life. And this will be a crucial aspect of his critique against the theory of social contract.

In his book *The Political Thought of Hume and His Contemporaries*, Frederick Whelan analyses Hume's rejection of the social contract, starting by distinguishing between three versions of this theory: the theory of an original contract, consent theory, and hypothetical contractarianism. The theory of *original contract*<sup>4</sup> affirms, in his view,

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<sup>4</sup> The term *original contract* is explicitly used by John Locke in the *Second Treatise of Government* where he states: "And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation, to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it; or else this original compact, whereby he with others incorporates into one society,

that legitimate states were historically established by agreements between the rulers and the ruled and they involved general consent on the part of the people and formal promises to obey in exchange for protection and other benefits and on the condition that the rulers will govern by taking into consideration the interests of the people (Whelan 2015, 62).

One objection that Hume presents against this version of contractarianism is that it is reasonable to believe that a primitive society pre-existed the institution of any government, which was invented as soon as inequality in private property was large enough as to tempt people to violate the rules of justice. Hence, Hume accepts that government arise from the same voluntary convention of men that previously established the rules of justice, adding “that the voluntary consent of men must here have the greater efficacy, that the authority of the magistrate does at first stand upon the foundation of a promise of the subjects, by which they bind themselves to obedience; as in every other contract or engagement” (Hume 1960, 554). Therefore, he admits that an original contract *could* have occurred. But its occurrence would be a conjectural matter and there cannot be any irrefutable proof of its existence, and therefore it cannot serve as a basis for political legitimacy.

So, the original agreement is by no means the only possible explanation for our political life. There are other alternatives we should consider. And if we study the origins of actually existing governments, we notice that they can be traced to usurpation and conquest, which does not make them illegitimate, because their legitimacy depends on them being stable, long-established and beneficial for those who are governed (Whelan 2015, 65-66). Moreover, Hume affirms in his essay *Of the Original Contract* that a convention on obeying the rules of justice, like the one which specifies that we should keep our promises, must exist before the convention establishing the government. Furthermore, even if this original contract was real, it would offer no guidance for modern societies given the great difference in social conditions.

Therefore, Hume believes that, in reality, there is no proof that an original contract was ever written, and, even if it was established in ancient times, the numerous changes of governments and rulers would render it useless or lacking any authority (Hume 1994, 189). So, as Whelan affirms, “either there was no original contract, or it is irretrievable and irrelevant” (Whelan 2015, 65).

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would signify nothing, and be no compact, if he be left free, and under no other ties than he was in before in the state of nature”. (Locke 1980, 52-53).

The second version of contractarianism mentioned by Whelan is *consent theory*. According to it legitimate government must be based on the consent of those who are ruled, which must be unanimous when the civil society is constituted. Afterwards, when it comes to making laws, appointing rulers and so on, the consent of the majority suffices. Another condition that must be satisfied according to this view is that every member should have the opportunity to express his consent. And this is especially problematic when it comes to the opportunity that members of the next generations would have to explicitly express their consent for the civil society they live in and for its institutions. This is the reason why, defenders of this theory like John Locke allowed not only for explicit consent, but also for *tacit consent*<sup>5</sup>.

As I mentioned before, Hume does not believe that consent would be necessary to secure political legitimacy and authority. Moreover, although he acknowledges that consent would be the best foundation for our government, given the perverse nature of man it will not be sufficient to secure political authority. And, Hume does not find the notion of “tacit consent” any more satisfying. In reality, a tacit consent could exist only if people’s choice would actually make any difference in relation with the problem of authority and with the duty of allegiance. However, in Hume’s opinion there is no real choice:

“Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artizan 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? We may as well assert, that a man, by remaining in a vessel, freely consents to the dominion of the master; though he was carried on board while asleep, and must leap into the ocean, and perish, the moment he leaves her” (Hume 1994, 193)

The third version of contractarianism mentioned by Whelan is the one based on *hypothetical consent*: “the view that a defensible, legitimate,

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<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging the difficulties raised by the condition that people should manifest their consent explicitly, Locke affirms that tacit consent should be considered sufficient to generate the duty of obedience: “And to this I say, that every man, that hath any possessions, or enjoyment, of any part of the dominions of any government, doth thereby give his tacit consent, and is as far forth obliged to obedience to the laws of that government, during such enjoyment, as any one under it; whether this his possession be of land, to him and his heirs for ever, or a lodging only for a week; or whether it be barely travelling freely on the highway; and in effect, it reaches as far as the very being of any one within the territories of that government” (Locke 1980, 64).

or obligatory government is one that rational individuals would have consented to or contracted into, in appropriate circumstances, or would approve upon reflection, in a thought experiment” (Whelan 2015, 73). And he adds that, in his opinion, this version was not advanced in a clear way by any author before Kant and it is specific to contemporary forms of contractarianism. Hence, he does not believe that Hume addressed this theory in his criticism, because hypothetical consent could be considered as an adequate foundation for a real political obligation. Moreover, Whelan affirms that Hume’s own theory of justice could be interpreted in the light of this version of the social contract theory: “Furthermore, Hume’s account of the origin of government as a convention in the *Treatise* explicitly holds that, at a certain point in social evolution, and with experience of lapses in the observance of justice, individuals would agree to the establishment of government (and would undertake an obligation of allegiance) in view of an anticipated net advantage to themselves in doing so” (Whelan 2015, 74).

In my opinion, this interpretation of Hume’s conception doesn’t take into consideration the fact that the “invention” of justice and other artificial virtues does not derive from any explicit, tacit or even hypothetical agreement about what is morally just. And, even if he does not address hypothetical contractarianism in an explicit way, his argument against the theory of tacit consent is equally efficient against the theory of hypothetical consent. Because, if it seems unreasonable to state that a poor peasant is tacitly consenting to the political society and its rules because he does not attempt to leave it, with the price of losing his life, it would be even more unreasonable to say that the talk about his hypothetical consent would be a better solution to this problem.

Moreover, the “convention” mentioned by Hume is nothing else than a gradual and historically contingent process derived initially from greed and self-interest and carried on with the objective of maintaining and promoting social cooperation. The moralization process, which takes place afterwards by means of education and norms promoted by politicians, does not confer genuine moral value to those “conventions” that would make them the standard for assessing the legitimacy of government. And, as Whelan himself recognizes, there are multiple other differences between Hume’s conception and contractarianism: he does not mention any state of nature<sup>6</sup>, he assigns no moral value to the manifestation

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<sup>6</sup> The description of the state nature of is essential for defenders of the social contract theory like Locke who described it as a state of “perfect freedom” and equality (1980, 8)



of will or the consent (explicit, tacit or hypothetical), he does not speak of sovereignty as the unique and collective will of the members of the political community<sup>7</sup>, he does not mention the fact that the state would be a moral person that would have, rights, interests and so on (Whelan 2015, 77-80). Therefore, I believe that Whelan overestimates the similarities between Hume's political view and hypothetical contractarianism.

Other arguments in favour of this statement could be provided by the careful analysis of his conception about the origin of government. In his essay dedicated to this topic, he argues that man is a creature born in society and forced to live in it by necessity, natural inclination and habit. Hence, social life is man's natural environment and, as a consequence, it does not have a starting point. Political society, on the other hand, is created as soon as his social life progresses as a means to administer justice and this is its unique purpose. But, it is not generated by means of an original agreement. As I mentioned before, it is developed step by step, in a *contingent historical process* which is not oriented or governed by any other transcendent moral or political standard.

This is the reason why he affirms that, although all men are capable to understand the necessity of justice for maintaining peace, social order and society, human nature is so frail and perverse that it is impossible to keep them on the paths of justice: "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" (Hume 1994, 20).

The *incurability* of this weakness of human nature is essential for Hume's political view. Because men cannot cure it, they are compelled to find a palliative for it, and this palliative is the institution of magistrates, who have the primary task of administering justice. Therefore, in his view, obedience is a new duty that must be invented in order to support the duty of justice. It is a kind of duty which derives from a sense of obligation based on the reflection regarding the necessities of human society (for example: justice, fidelity and allegiance). Hence, he maintains that the duty of allegiance is not derived from the duty to respect our promises. In fact, both of them are based on the interests and necessities of society. Because, if the unique foundation of allegiance would be the fidelity to our promises, we could ask: Why are we bound to respect our

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or Rousseau (1796, 7) who spoke about the fact that man is born free even if everywhere he is in chains ("L'homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans le fers").

<sup>7</sup> The notion common or *general will* ("volonté générale") as a foundation for political sovereignty is a central concept for Rousseau (1796, 32).

promise? Hume's answer will be the following one: "If the reason be asked of that obedience, which we are bound to pay to government, I readily answer, *because society could not otherwise subsist*: And this answer is clear and intelligible to all mankind" (Hume 1994, 197).

In his essay *Of the First Principles of Government* he argues in a similar manner that the opinion of those who are ruled, according to which government is beneficial because society couldn't subsist without it, is the only foundation on which the authority of the rulers is based. This is how he explains the easiness with which the many are governed by the few, if we take into consideration the fact that the many have the force on their side and the rulers authority is based only have the only on the opinion: "It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular" (Hume 1994, 16). And he adds that there are two kinds of opinions: the first is the opinion of interests, which refers to the general advantage associated with government, and the second is the opinion of rights, which is related with the right to power and the right to property.

Finally, another argument for the difference between Hume's political view and contractarianism is provided by his conception regarding the relation between political authority and liberty. The defenders of social contract believed that individual liberty is the most important value from a political point of view, representing the source of authority (which is the derivative value) and the standard by which we evaluate its legitimacy: individual manifestations of will generate the common will that constitutes sovereignty, they define its scope and limits which, once they are transcended, entitle individuals to rise up against the abusive rulers<sup>8</sup>. Hume, on the other hand, believes that in all the governments there is perpetual struggle between authority and liberty, a struggle between two values which are equally important for the survival of political community:

"In all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest. A great sacrifice of liberty must necessarily be made in every government; yet even authority, which confines liberty, can never, and perhaps ought never, in any constitution, to become quite entire and uncontrollable" (Hume 1994, 22).

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this conception see the paper *Self-Ownership and Freedom: Reasons for Maintaining a Traditional Connection* (Țuțui 2006, 77-113).

Hence, Hume supports the idea that none of the two values is fundamental, and none is derivative. They are independent from one another, and therefore it is important to secure the equilibrium between them. In the final part of the essay, he even affirms that liberty is the *perfection* of civil society, while authority is *essential to its very existence*. Nevertheless, he insists that authority is capable of supporting itself and must be guarded with less jealousy than liberty, which, taking into consideration human indolence, can more easily be neglected (Hume 1994, 23).

Therefore, Hume's political conception is much deeply rooted in the real history of political communities than the theory of the social contract, and it represents a more complex explanation of the evolution of human political and moral life. Nevertheless, there is a serious difficulty it has to face, which is, once more, parallel to the ones I mentioned in relation with his epistemology and moral philosophy, namely the problem of *normativity*: although his theory could be interpreted as a better interpretation of how our political and moral life *was* and *is*, it doesn't provide a very clear explanation about how they *should* be. For example, it is not very clear how could we evaluate if a given set of moral rules are right or not, or if a given government is legitimate or not.

All he has to say about the legitimacy of government is that it must be appraised by taking into consideration its usefulness in preserving peace and order. For example, in his work, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* he states:

“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” (Hume 1983, 34).

But, presumably, even authoritarian and tyrannical regimes could satisfy this condition. They could be even better in securing peace and social order, by sacrificing individual freedom. However, we could hardly label them as legitimate. Moreover, unfortunately Hume does not provide a detailed explanation why he believes that the promotion of peace and order itself is a more significant political objective than individual freedom and prosperity. This is the reason why Whelan even accuses him of offering an empirical theory of political stability instead of a normative theory, noticing that “since virtually any existing government (by this analysis) rests on opinion, the concept loses any critical bearing for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate governments” (Whelan 2006, 71).

I believe that the only answer Hume could provide to this objection would be to remind us, once again, that the kind of freedom we have in mind when we express this objection is the illusory liberty of indifference, that human will as it is conceived by the defenders of social contract does not exist, and that individual human beings should not be described as substantial and unitary selves, independent from one another. For him, individual human beings did not pre-exist social life, and it is more reasonable to believe that they always lived in society and that the political community evolved gradually from it. So, individuals shouldn't be regarded as the source of morality and political authority, and their freedom shouldn't be presented in opposition with social order and peace. There is no gap in human nature between the natural beings and the social beings. As I mentioned in the section dedicated to its epistemology, he believes that man is not only a rational being, but also a sociable and active being, and that his capacities for knowledge were designed by nature in such a way as to have a direct reference to his social and active features. And, as it was the case with his theory about knowledge and morality, we have no access to standard different from the natural instincts or tendencies existing in us and about which we learn from experience.

It is true that this answer doesn't offer a solution which would be considered as satisfactory by those who objected that his theory lacks a clear and robust account of the normative character of morality or political legitimacy. But, in the same time, I believe that he wouldn't have a problem to accept this verdict, while underlining as he does in the final part of his essay *Of the Original Contract*, that even if the general opinion is not the best standard in science, when it comes to morals, "there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can ever be decided" (Hume 1994, 200).

## 6. Conclusions

In the previous sections I presented Hume's epistemological, moral and political view according to which the role of human reason is depreciated in relation with that of the experience, not allowing for any attempt to transcend the evidence offered by our most vivid perceptions, called impressions. For him, our mind is not a substantial and unitary self: is nothing but a collection of perceptions associated by means of principles like resemblance, contiguity and causation. The status of human freedom itself is significantly diminished to that of liberty of spontaneity, which is determined by our character, motives, interests and circumstances.

Therefore, Hume does not provide an account of morality based on the capacity of our reason to discover the standards of moral evaluation and on the human's freedom capacity to decide whether to respect them or not. As a consequence, his explanation of our moral and political life diverges significantly from that of the defenders of the social contract theory. The individual's ability to reason, to freely chose and to evaluate plays a minor role in comparison with the one described in the conceptions of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and the other representatives of the social contract theory. His theory is not one in which the individual, as moral agent, would have a central position and an essential responsibility. On the contrary, this central function is played by the social context: our morality and our political life are by their nature social and they develop in a social environment, gradually, step by step, and not by means of an original invention like the social contract.

This reconsideration of man's knowledge, morals and political life based on experience and observation, has to face the objection that it does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the normative aspect of knowledge, morality and political legitimacy: it seems to offer only a description of how we *actually* think, evaluate and behave, but not of how we *should* perform these actions. However, as it was already mentioned, I don't believe that Hume would have any reason to reject the accusation that he presented only an empirical account of our epistemic, moral and political life, instead of a normative one, if we take into consideration that his ambition was precisely to develop a "science of man" based on the experimental method.

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