Max Weber Programme Conference

"David Hume on Norms and Institutions"

San Domenico di Fiesole, Villa la Fonte, 17 April 2008

Imagination and the Self in the Science of Man

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Abstract
Hume is celebrated in the history of philosophy for his claim that reason is the slave of passion. However, by denying that reason can play its traditional role of directing and controlling our affects, he raises the question of how we do in fact modify our passionate impulses. In this presentation I'll situate Hume's discussion of these issues in a longer philosophical debate about the nature of reason and of passion, and consider how it shapes his conception of the science of man.

One of the casualties of the philosophical view that Hume develops in his *Treatise of Human Nature* is a strong conception of the unity of the self. 'When I enter most intimately into what I call myself', he reports, 'I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.'[1] If we attend carefully to our everyday experience, Hume goes on to suggest, we find that it consists of sequences of distinct perceptions broken by periods of sleep; and if we then ask how we come by the idea that these sequences belong to a single self, we are forced to conclude that 'the identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one.'[2] Our psychological disposition to associate ideas imposes an imaginary unity on our perceptions, and moulds them into a self that endures through change.[3]

This analysis provides a vivid illustration of one of the young Hume's central themes. In the course of the *Treatise*, he challenges a series of entrenched beliefs about the means by which individual human beings create and maintain their integrity, and gradually subverts a traditional conception of a self that is capable of exerting a degree of mastery over its thoughts and actions. In its place he sets a fluctuating array of ephemeral impressions and ideas, organised by the psychological dispositions of the imagination. While such a self may be capable of developing along orderly lines, it seems on the face of things to lack a reflective and self-conscious means of integrating its own impulses. One of the things that therefore needs to be explained is how we are capable of organising our ideas and impressions, and developing reasonably stable characters.

Hume's description of inner experience embodies a challenge to a familiar analogy between a sovereign self, capable of controlling and unifying its disparate impulses, and a political sovereign whose task is to protect and discipline a body of diverse citizens. By refusing to model individual selfhood on political sovereignty, Hume implicitly raises the spectre of the self as state of nature, disorderly and unpredictable. This image heightens the sense of anxiety that already attaches to his

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[1] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, 1888), 252.
[2] *Treatise,* 259.
[3] *Treatise,* 259-62.

interpretation, but also draws attention to what is lacking in the Humean self as so far described. Just as individuals in the state of nature need to extricate themselves from their predicament by creating a sovereign, so the self needs to escape fragmentation by finding a means to integrate and organise its own perceptions. The question therefore arises: how, if at all, can this be done? Must we settle for the conclusion that the self is a broken sequence of impressions and ideas, or can our natural dispositions generate something approaching sovereignty?

Hume's discussion ultimately leans towards the latter view; but before he can address the issue on his own terms and begin to consider what the capacity for self-control consists in, he needs to shake his readers out of a comfortable conviction that the problem has an obvious and straightforward solution. Many of his contemporaries would have taken it for granted that what enables us to monitor and shape our perceptions is reason, the capacity to assess and direct our first-order beliefs, actions and passions. Rather as the political sovereign controls the state, sovereign reason controls the self, ordering its impulses into a coherent and preferably a virtuous whole. To subvert this complacency, Hume resorts to provocation. Dramatically inverting the established picture, he declares that reason is incapable of moving or controlling the passions, and instead of being their master is their slave. By challenging the generally accepted account of individual sovereignty, he opens up a space in which it is possible to think afresh about what, if anything, makes a unified self.

As Michael Moriarty has recently pointed out, the interest of twenty-first century readers in the history of the self is irretrievably marked by the work of those masters of suspicion, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud.[4] So much so, that the early-modern period is sometimes depicted as an almost prehistoric era in which philosophers were oblivious of the problems attaching to a fractured and divided identity. If one accepts such a narrative, Hume figures as an innovator who confronts an uncomfortable truth, not only by drawing attention to the absence of a distinct idea of the self, but also by stripping reason of the capacity to control and shape the flow of our passions. Moreover, this assessment of his originality gains support from his own characterisation of the author of the *Treatise* as so 'utterly abandoned and disconsolate' that he no longer knows whether he or his opponents are the more monstrous and deformed. 'I have exposed myself to the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians; and can I wonder at the insults I must suffer?'[5]

Partly because Hume dramatises the contentiousness of his philosophy, and partly because his flamboyant turns of phrase give some of his pronouncements an air of audacious novelty, it is easy to take him at his own estimation as a writer whose views lie beyond the boundaries of existing philosophical debate. But this interpretation needs to be handled cautiously. By the end of the seventeenth century there was widespread discussion of the internal divisions and blind spots within the self, together with a lively

[4] Michael Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought. The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
[5] *Treatise*, 264.

appreciation of their tendency to curtail our capacity for rational self-control. In addition, as I shall argue, the dethroning of reason that Hume champions so epigrammatically had already been debated in philosophical circles for more than a generation. The recognition that in this case, as in a number of others, Hume's claims about the self echo some of his predecessors does not diminish his extraordinary inventiveness. Rather, it guides our appreciation of his originality by helping us to see how he brings together a range of acknowledged problems about the self and turns them into a research programme for the science of man. To understand the history of the science of man we need to grasp the problems to which it was addressed; and some of these, I shall suggest, are embedded in Hume's analysis of the relations between reason, sympathy and passion.

The moral and metaphysical power of reason is, according to Hume, generally taken for granted.

> 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. Every rational creature, 'tis said, is obliged to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it 'till it be entirely subdued, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle. On this method of thinking the greater part of moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be founded; nor is there an ampler field, as well for metaphysical arguments, as popular declamations, than this suppos'd pre-eminence of reason above passion.[6]

It is against this background that Hume makes what he presents as the revolutionary claim that 'Since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion.'[7] The contention, however, that reason alone can neither generate action nor move the will echoes the substance of two long-standing and connected debates within seventeenth-century philosophy, one concerned with reason's motivating power, the other with its effect on volition. Both these discussions are grounded on a shared set of assumptions about what makes the passions dangerous and in need of control. Passions, it is generally held, are part of our ordinary responses to the assemblage of sensory experience, memory and fantasy that early-modern writers regard as belonging to the realm of imagination. Although the passions are aroused by many types of experience, they are particularly responsive to the senses – to present imagery, sounds, smells or tastes that set off trains of association formed by our individual and collective histories. The power of the passions lies not only in the psychological hold that states such as joy, grief or fear exert over us, but also in the fact that they prompt us to act; unless something prevents it, a person in a rage will express their feelings in violent or aggressive behaviour, and even someone with a mild fear of heights will go out of their way to avoid hanging terraces or balconies. What makes the

[6] *Treatise,* 413.
[7] *Treatise,* 414-5.

passions an object of suspicion is therefore their ubiquitousness, forcefulness, relation to action, and potential destructiveness. Unless they are to some extent checked, individuals will simply act on their strongest affects, and moral and social chaos will result.

Broadly speaking, the presumed ability of reason to modify or moderate the passions is explained in two ways. According to some writers, conclusions derived by rational steps from well-grounded or self-evident premises are peculiarly compelling, and this quality explains not only how they figure in our thought processes, but also how they shape our actions. The sheer rational conviction that injustice is wrong, for example, can be enough to make one put the generalisation into practice by acting on it. According to other writers, the process of deriving conclusions from premises is suffused with a form of delight, potentially more compelling than even the strongest passion. Because reasoning is itself emotional, it can motivate us to act as it dictates, thus providing a counterweight to our disposition to act on our passionate pains and pleasures. Our actions are therefore the fruit of negotiation or contest between our passionate responses to the sensible world on the one side, and what are known as the interior or intellectual emotions aroused by reasoning on the other. Each of these two views remained in circulation in the early eighteenth century, and together they form part of the backdrop to Hume's argument.

Perhaps the most uncompromising critique of reason's power to affect passion, and thus action, had been offered by Thomas Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes distinguishes prudence, the ability to relate means to ends on the basis of experience and memory,[8] from reason, the art of constructing definitions and inferring their consequences.[9] Reasoning, as Hobbes conceives it, consists in what he calls reckoning or adding and subtracting terms. Whether their subject matter is mathematics, logic, politics or law, reasoners work out the consequences of definitions and build up demonstrations, which may be certain but are sometimes only probable.[10] Demonstrations in turn contribute to science, defined as 'the knowledge of consequences, and dependence of one fact on another: by which, out of what we can presently do, we know how to do something else when we will, or the like, another time...'[11] As this last statement implies, and as Hobbes explicitly points out, the knowledge we gain through reasoning is conditional.[12] It is conditional on the correctness or appropriateness of the definitions that ground a demonstration and is in this sense 'knowledge of the consequences of words.'[13] In addition, as we just have seen, reasoning produces general knowledge of 'the dependence of one fact on another', and enables us to infer what to do 'when we will' or 'another time'. So it is also conditional in the sense that it gives us information of the form, 'If the figure shown be a circle, then any straight line through the centre shall

[8] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52.
[9] *Leviathan,* 35.
[10] *Leviathan,* 37.
[11] *Leviathan,* 35
[12] *Leviathan,* 47.
[13] *Leviathan,* 48

divide it into two equal parts.' And this, Hobbes concludes, 'is the Knowledge required of a Philosopher; that is to say, of him that pretends to Reasoning.'[14]

Hobbes is clear that the ability to reason has to be learned, and that some people are better suited to acquiring the skill than others. The differences that determine whether or not a particular individual will take to reasoning lie in what he describes as types of wit, and these are in turn shaped by the passions. Although everyone acquires a certain degree of natural wit from their everyday experience 'without method, culture or instruction,'[15] people vary in the quickness of their imagination and their ability to direct their thoughts to a particular end: 'some men's thoughts run one way, some another; and are held to, and observe differently the things that pass through their imagination.' Furthermore, while some individuals tend to notice the similarities between their thoughts, and thus possess the rudiments of what is called a good fancy, others who fix on differences between thoughts have the makings of good judgment or discretion,[16] a facility that lends itself to the cultivation of acquired reason or wit. However, as Hobbes repeatedly insists, 'the causes of the difference of Witts, are in the Passions' and 'The Passions that most of all cause the differences of Wit, are principally, the more or less Desire of Power, of Riches, of Knowledge, and of Honour. All of which may be reduced to the first, that is Desire of Power.'[17] Without some passionate desire to direct our thoughts, the imagination can be neither quick and directed to some end, nor steady and capable of concentration. It is only strong passions that save us from stupidity on the one hand and madness on the other. 'For as to have no Desire is to be Dead; so to have weak Passions, is Dulnesse; and to have Passions indifferently for everything, GIDDINESSE, and *Distraction*; and to have stronger, and more vehement Passions for any thing, than is ordinarily seen in others, is what men call MADNESSE.'[18]

In this discussion Hobbes is concerned with the antecedents of our ability to reason, but his account nevertheless undermines the view that this capacity stands apart from the passions and is independently capable of controlling them. As he presents the matter, desire and reason operate together, both insofar as desire prompts us to learn to reason, and insofar as it motivates us to use this skill. Without a desire to achieve a particular goal, nothing would move us formulate new definitions and explore their consequences, 'for the Thoughts, are to the Desires, as Scouts and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to all things Desired.'[19] As this image suggests, Hobbes makes reason subordinate to desire, and his view that reason can only find the connections between one definition and another when it is directed by something other than itself is in turn grounded in his conception of reasoning as conditional or hypothetical. Because the conclusions of demonstrations are prefaced by an 'if' standing in the way of an imperatival 'Do such and such', something more than reasoning is needed to shift us out

[14] *Leviathan,* 60.
[15] *Leviathan,* 50.
[16] *Leviathan,* 50-1.
[17] *Leviathan,* 53.
[18] *Leviathan,* 54.
[19] *Leviathan,* 53.

of this conditional mood, and generate thought or action. Viewed in this way, reason alone has no power to control the passions; instead, passion and reason together lead us to scientific knowledge.

Hume's account of reason takes up two central elements in Hobbes's argument. First, he shares the view that reason alone cannot motivate us to act; when it illuminates the relations between abstract ideas, such as those of arithmetic or mechanics, it only directs our judgment concerning causes and effects and remains cut off from the realm of action.[20] Secondly, he echoes Hobbes's claim that desire is what moves us to reason and act. The prospect of pleasure or pain in a state of affairs constitutes an emotion of desire or aversion, and the presence of this emotion is what prompts us to work out how to gain or avoid the state in question. However, as well as being directed to specific ends, desire and aversion extend to their causes and effects 'as they are pointed out to us by reason and experience.'[21] If, for example, I long to see a friend, I also long to hear the doorbell that heralds her arrival; or if you want to reach the conclusion of a mathematical proof, you also want to reach its penultimate step. Emotion therefore arouses our interest in causal sequences that are already known to us, as well as prompting us to discover unknown causes and effects. Furthermore, reason alone cannot achieve this goal. 'Where the objects themselves do not affect us, their connexion can never give them any influence; and 'tis plain that, as reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us.'[22]

Whether or not Hume was conscious of taking up a Hobbesian line of argument, his discussion of the impotence of abstract reasoning contributes to an existing debate, and revives an attempt to limit its contribution to controlling the passions. However, as well as opposing the view that reason can directly shape our affects and thus the actions that flow from them, Hume is keen to discredit another widely held claim: that reason or understanding has an effect on the will. His focus this time is on the common assumption that, by shaping our volitions and prompting us to act rationally, reason creates a counterweight to the passions and inhibits their ability to determine our behaviour. Ideally, rational volition outfaces passion, and prevents us from acting in ways that are ill-considered or destructive.

The general view that reasoning shapes our volitions had been defended in a number of ways. Descartes, for example, had argued that, although clear and distinct ideas do not altogether constrain volition, they are nevertheless so intrinsically compelling that the will assents to them. When you understand that 2+2=4, for example, it becomes impossible seriously to assert the contrary. Although one can still decide to act in a fashion that flies in the face of a clear and distinct idea, there is something perverse about refusing the benefit of understanding and thwarting the will's natural inclination to follow reason. Furthermore, the Cartesian method only works because we do not usually follow such a wanton course. By enlarging our stock of clear and distinct

[20] Hume, *Treatise*, 413-4.
[21] Hume, *Treatise*, 414,

ideas, we are able to distinguish good from bad reasons for acting; and because this understanding normally shapes our volitions, it enables us to refrain from actions grounded on insufficient or misleading information.

Philosophers who maintain that reasoning affects our behaviour via the intermediary of the will are liable to be called on to explain how this is possible, and hence to elucidate the alleged connection between understanding and volition. How does a grasp of the general relations between words or ideas prompt us to act? Early-modern answers to this question tend to be shaped by the prior assumption that, regardless of what reasoning may do, we normally act on our passions, which incorporate an element of aversion or desire. To fear war, for example, is to be averse to it, and this aspect of the passion is what moves us to prevent or avoid it. With this model in mind, it seems to follow that, if reason is going to move the will, it must contain a motivating element comparable to a desire. Some writers take up this line of thought and argue that reasoning arouses what are known as intellectual emotions - intense desires and pleasures that serve to reinforce our commitment both to theoretical understanding and a correspondingly rational way of life. Others, however, are sceptical. In their view, reasoning simply consists in perceiving the relations between general terms. Comprehending a demonstration gives us what Hobbes calls conditional knowledge about the consequences of specified types of situation, but does not in itself incline us to do anything. However, if it remains cut off from willing or volition, and stands apart from the realm of action, the problem remains: how can reasoning have any effect on the will, and thus on action?

This question is directly addressed by both Hobbes and Locke, who between them articulate what would later become the Humean position that reason alone cannot give rise to volition. As we have seen, Hobbes characterises reason in a way that makes the difficulty perspicuous. He then goes on to offer a radical solution by reinterpreting volitions as appetites or passions. Since Hume does not follow him down this path, there is no need to explore it here. More relevant is the view developed by Locke, who retains a role for volition in the process, but argues that it is primarily responsive to passion. We know from experience, he maintains, that the will is 'a power to begin or forebear, continue or end several actions of our minds and motions of our bodies'[23] ; but if we go on to ask what moves it, the answer does not lie with reason. Instead, 'that which immediately determines the will to every voluntary action is the uneasiness of desire, fixed on some absent good.' The immediate antecedent of a volition is thus a desire, that is, the passion we feel 'upon the absence of any thing, whose present enjoyment carries the *Idea* of Delight with it.'[24] Rather than the will controlling the passions, the passions control the will.

The effectiveness of Locke's argument depends on his definition of volition as what moves us to begin, continue or end a thought or action. In departing from the view

[23] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975), II, xxi.
[24] *Essay*, II. xx.

adopted, for example, by Descartes, that the role of the will is to assent to judgments, Locke breaks an intimate connection between volition and reason, and creates a space between the two. If a volition causes a thought or action to begin or end, we can ask what in turn causes it; and Locke's answer returns to the deeply-rooted conviction that it is our passions, and in particular our desires, that have power to move us in this way. Implicitly taking up Hobbes's remark that 'to have no desire is to be dead', he emphasises the extent to which passion drives thinking and action. Not only is it irrepressible, despite the Stoic claim to the contrary; it is also as essential to our voluntary actions as to our instinctive animal existence.

As we have seen, Hume incorporates elements of Hobbes's position into his account of reason's inability to modify the passions by itself. He also takes up two central elements of Locke's argument. His interpretation of volition as 'that internal impression we feel and are conscious of when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body or perception of our mind' echoes Locke's definition, as does his claim that the will is determined by both calm and violent passions.[25] So when Hume puts the two arguments together and announces that, because 'reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition,' it is 'incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion,' he is not saying anything particularly new. The force of his claim is rather to reiterate and underline a conception of the self championed by the two leading English philosophers of the previous century. Against the view that passion is an external force which needs to be kept under control by the two active faculties of intellect and will, Locke and Hume move passion to the centre of the self and make it the driving force of rational thought and action. In doing so, they replace the old puzzle as to how reason and volition can check the unruly passions with a different question. They ask how the passions can modify themselves or, to put the point another way, how some passions can modify others and thus shape individual and collective character.

Hume may therefore be said to have inherited the question he confronted when he set out to construct a comprehensive science of man: how is it possible to explicate the workings of what one might call an essentially passionate self, beyond the control of reason? One available model lay in the very analysis of the passions that he and other philosophers who shared his outlook were in the process of rejecting. As we have seen, authors who represented human beings as divided between reason and passion had explained the operations of the passions by appealing to a group of capacities associated with imagination. According to many advocates of this view, we are equipped with God-given abilities to feel passions that contribute to our individual and collective survival, and to develop sociable affective habits on the basis of our experience. So, to some extent at least, the passions are governed by well-adapted mechanisms. Moreover, once it is accepted that they work in an orderly fashion and play a vital part in human existence, it becomes natural to ask how far they need to be controlled. Perhaps the dangers they pose have been exaggerated by philosophers in the grip of an other-worldly conception of virtue, for whom a susceptibility to bodily pleasure constitutes a threat to

[25] *Treatise*, 417-8.

the immortal soul. Or perhaps the conclusion that reason alone cannot control the passions need not condemn us to misery or anarchy, but can instead open the way to a more positive assessment of a self governed by imagination. This debate is played out in the intellectual relationship between Malebranche on the one hand and Hutcheson and Hume on the other.

Malebranche defines the passions as 'impressions from the Author of nature that incline us toward loving our body and all that might be of use in its preservation'.[26] They consist in motions of the corporeal animal spirits, and are contrasted with the soul's natural inclinations 'to the Word of God, to eternal truth and wisdom, i.e. to sovereign reason.'[27] Since the Fall, the balance between these two types of inclination has been upset, and the body has overpowered the soul. Instead of humbly representing our material needs to the mind, the passions 'continually draw us away from ourselves, and by their clatter and shadows, tear us away from God, to whom we should be inseparably united.'[28] We must therefore do everything in our power to resist their threats and endearments. However, even as he condemns them as a source of error and sin, Malebranche concedes that the passions have their uses. 'Sensible pleasure is the mark that nature has attached to the use of certain things, in order that we might use them for the preservation of the body without having to bother with a rational examination of them.'[29] As this remark implies, the passions work mechanically, without the intervention of the rational part of the soul; in fact, 'although the soul necessarily witnesses the operations of its machine, and although it is moved by its machine as a result of the laws concerning its union with the body, it has no part at all in its various movements, of which it is in no way the true cause.'[30] Humans are therefore equipped with corporeal dispositions to respond to certain types of stimuli, which operate via the pains and pleasures of emotions such as love or fear.

Foremost amongst these dispositions are the tendencies to compare oneself with others and to sympathise with them. The point of sympathy, according to Malebranche, is to incline us to pity and compassion, and thus to make us care for those in trouble. To illustrate his claim, he takes the example of what happens when someone is on the point of losing a great good.

> A face takes on expressions of rage and despair so lively and unexpected that they disarm and immobilise even the most impassioned. This terrible and sudden view of death, painted by the hand of nature on the unhappy countenance, stops those motions of the enemy's spirits and blood which are sweeping him towards vengeance, as though he has been struck. At this moment, when the opponent is accessible and favourably disposed, nature traces a humble and submissive air on the face of the unhappy man

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[26] Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, ed. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 338 (some translations modified).
[27] *Search*, 337.
[28] *Search*, 357
[29] *Search*, 359.
[30] *Search*, 351,

> ... and the opponent receives in his spirits and blood an impression that he was incapable of receiving before. He begins mechanically to experience the motions accompanying compassion, which naturally inclines his soul to charity and pity.[31]

Malebranche believes in addition that the disposition to compare ourselves to others, and to express admiration for their *grandeur* and contempt for their *petitesse*, has beneficial social consequences.

> It is necessary ... to be humble and timid, and even to make a show of one's inward disposition by displaying a modest countenance and a respectful or fearful air, when one is in the presence of a person of high rank, or of a proud and powerful man. For it is almost always advantageous to the body's welfare if the imagination submits in the face of sensible *grandeur*, and shows it the exterior marks of submission and of its interior veneration. But this happens naturally and mechanically, without any action on the part of the will, and often in spite of its resistance.[32]

At least some of our passions are therefore the outcome of mechanisms that operate in a mechanical and automatic fashion, and are designed to ensure that we behave in ways that are calculated to improve our chances of avoiding conflict.

These two sets of mechanisms play a central role in Malebranche's account of the divinely-ordained functions served by the passions. By moulding our emotions, sympathy and comparison protect the weak from the strong and, by making us responsive to the affects of others, foster our individual and collective survival. Although the benefits of these arrangements are limited by the passions' sheer force, they nevertheless contribute to an economy that inclines us to sociability and makes social and political life possible. When Hume came to write the *Treatise*, he took over the positive part of Malebranche's position, and organised his account of the working of the passions around the processes of sympathy and comparison. Putting aside Malebranche's pessimism about the deficiencies of the body and imagination, he concentrates on the benevolent implications of our passionate dispositions and makes them central to his analysis of human nature. The fact that neither the reason nor the will are capable of controlling the passions therefore does not condemn one to a desolate vision of humanity mired in sin.

This reassessment of the imaginative dispositions governing the passions aims to shift attention away from their supposed destructive force, and to undermine the assumption that, without the intervention of reason, our lives are liable to be filled with painful and conflicting emotions. However, it brings with it a renewed worry as to whether and how we are capable of shaping and controlling our passions, and evokes the dispersed and centre-less self described by Hume. The workings of imagination may produce moderately regular patterns of thought and action, so that the strings of perceptions he identifies are explicable. But how are we to get a grip on these processes, and use them to soften the unsociable traits within our individual characters? This question

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[31] *Search*, 351

[32] *Search*, 376-7.

hovers over Hume's analysis of the self, but also arises in the account of sympathy that he takes over from Malebranche. As we have seen, Malebranche is clear that sympathy operates mechanically. It create an encompassing, physical web of feeling, in which passions pass from one person to another without the intervention of rational judgement. An expression of desperation on a man's face 'automatically' arouses compassion, just as the sight of another person's suffering excites sadness. Hume adopts the central features of this view and, like Malebranche, holds that passions pass back and forth among individuals. 'As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget corresponding movements in every human creature.'[33] Many of our emotions therefore come to us from outside, in the sense that we feel them 'more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition.'[34] Moreover, as we echo or reflect them, they are subtly transformed. 'In general we may remark that the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others' emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees.'[35]

Sympathy, according to Hume, explains many of the patterns of feeling to which humans are subject.[36] By converting our ideas of other people's passions into answering passions of our own, sympathy overrides individual interest and produces a system of largely benevolent, affective exchange. The passions it arouses are therefore stages in an interpersonal process to which we are unavoidably subject; and because it is part of our nature to be mirrors to one another, many of our affects arise more from passionate reflection than from our individual dispositions and character. To some degree, then, human beings are conduits of emotion. Passions flow through us in accordance with mechanisms over which we have little control, so that one can even ask how far a particular emotion is 'really' one's own. For example, is my sudden feeling of pity a quasi-mechanical response to your suffering, or does it answer to something more stable and dependable in my character? Here, once again, we encounter a gap between the perceptions we observe when we look inside ourselves, and a sovereign self capable of shaping its own features.

Hume's conception of our passions may thus be said to incorporate some of the major philosophical innovations of the two preceding generations. He makes the passions the fulcrum of a benevolent image of the self, and by doing so sets the scene for an optimistic and progressive science of man. At the same time, however, he poses some questions for this science to investigate, questions about the extent to which we can control our passions and the means by which we can do so. As we have seen, these problems are dramatised in Hume's image of the absent self, but also exemplified in his discussion of two more specific themes, namely the role of reason and the nature of sympathy. They are then taken up by subsequent Scottish writers who recognise and

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[33] *Treatise*, 316-7.
[34] *Treatise*, 575-6.
[35] *Treatise*, 365.
[36] *Treatise*, 363.

appreciate Hume's legacy, and are keen to advance the science of man by providing an acceptable interpretation of our individual capacity for self-control.

One of the most revealing attempts to deal with the problems posed by Hume is to be found in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* In the opening chapter, Smith reiterates the view that sympathy, a disposition to feel compassion for the suffering of others and to rejoice at their delight, is a principle of human nature. However, as he immediately goes on to clarify, it arises from our capacity to imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's position. 'For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception.'[37] While Smith is far from denying the power of sympathy (when we imagine someone on the rack, he says, 'we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him'), he is nevertheless emphatic that, because our senses 'never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person,' sympathy depends entirely on imagination and not on any transfer of passion. Here, then, he endorses Hume's view that sympathy consists in a causal sequence of impressions and ideas, but distances himself from Hume's images of reflection and reverberation, and thus from the suggestion that passions are communicated from one person to another. While Hume retains some vestiges of Malebranche's conviction that we are sometimes passive recipients of passion, Smith strengthens the boundary around the self and, by insisting that all its passions arise from its imaginative activity, guarantees that they are its own.

Smith's argument can therefore be read as an attempt to resolve a problem left hanging in the *Treatise*. As so often in the history of philosophy, the vital shift he makes is only a shift in emphasis, and partly consists in a change of metaphor. Where Hume and Malebranche had illuminated the self by evoking mutual relationships in which each side depends on the other, Smith introduces a subject whose self-contained power to imagine the feelings of others reduces its dependence on the immediate contribution of the senses. Once this view is in place he is in a position to deal with the central problem bequeathed by Hume, and to explain how, given the impotence of reason, the self can nevertheless exercise sovereignty over its passions. His account of the process by which our natural imaginative dispositions create an Impartial Spectator or inner judge, who edges us in the direction of virtue through a mixture of discipline and encouragement, offers a direct and comprehensive solution. By restoring an internal division between our self-centred passions and the impersonal viewpoint of the Impartial Spectator, Smith introduces an imaginative and morally-sensitive replacement to reason. Here, then, we find one way of staving off the philosophical anxiety that the *Treatise* was partly intended to provoke, and carrying forward a central element of the project underlying Hume's science of man.

[37] Adam Smith, the Theory of Moral sentiments, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, (Oxford Univesrity Press, 1976), 9.