

## 5 Hume's Framework for a Natural History of the Passions

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In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security.

(Hume 2000a, xvi)

### 1. Introduction

David Hume's concept of *passion*, as developed in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, serves as the basic building block of his political economy. The characteristics Hume ascribes to the passions in this work crucially shape the viewpoint in his later essays. In particular, he argues that observed behavior results exclusively from the passions, and that the passions are original existences. Furthermore, to understand Hume's account of economic development and his policy recommendations, it is essential to grasp not only the primary role of the passions but the fact that reason serves the passions.

This view of the passions as irreducible and not subject to rational correction seems at first sight to collide with Hume's historical outlook, which strives to explain the *development* of commerce, borrowing habits, international trade, and so forth. In this paper, we show how his position on the passions and his historical outlook come together in his political economy. First, we investigate the mechanism by which, according to Hume, institutions and other situational conditions influence people's behavior. We demonstrate that Hume construes these influences as a type of refinement—as the formation of new passions based on the perception of new external impressions. We also discuss Hume's account of the different ways in which a newly formed passion interacts with existing passions—whether it eliminates the existence of contrary passions, overrules the effect of the existing passions, or results in an altogether new effect. The combination of this theory of predominant passions and the theory of refinement, we argue, is the core of Hume's *natural history of the passions*; this dynamic framework

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of passion change provides the basis for explaining the development of economic and political institutions.

We then turn to Albert Hirschman's thesis that Hume praises the rise of commerce as the rise of the benign passion of interest, which supposedly suppresses the more violent and disruptive motivations of which humans are capable. We counter Hirschman's view by showing that Hume's use of the concept *interest* is ambiguous. It appears both in the narrow sense of avarice and in a more expansive sense; and while he certainly maintains the connection between the development of commerce and the dominance of interest in the narrow sense, he insists on the disruptive nature of this passion. *Interest* in its wider meaning differs substantially from *interest* as mere avarice, in that it is the result of rational self-restraint. Within the dynamic framework of passion change discussed in this paper, we illustrate how to demystify this notion of rational self-restraint. Refinement—the formation of new passions through the perception of new impressions—is a process initiated not only by accidental historical developments, but also through rational mediation. Reason—when providing insight into the suboptimal quality of actions driven by momentary, selfish desires—allows for such a rational refinement. It introduces external restraints that can bring about the formation of new, dominant passions, which in turn result in more beneficial actions. Thus we conclude that Hume not only provides a dynamic framework of passion change, but also envisages a notion of rational self-restraint within this framework. Contra Hirschman, then, we show that Hume distinguishes two types of commercial developments: one, socially disruptive, that is based on avarice; and another, more beneficial, that is based on rational self-restraint.

## **2. Passions in Explanation and Policy Advice**

Passions, according to Hume, are irreducible impressions that exhibit constant conjunctions with human actions.<sup>1</sup> Within his program of a “complete system of sciences,” the explanation of action enjoys a new foundation as the result of his elaboration of passions. A passion, like any impression, is an *original existence*, analogous to other physical states of a person.<sup>2</sup> That a passion arises through the mediation of an idea only specifies its origin; it does not mean that it can be reduced to other mentally represented components, like ideas or other impressions. In this sense, passions are primitive, irreducible entities of the mind. Nonetheless, Hume deems them worthy of an extended analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the relation between passions and actions is just as constant as are connections between phenomena in the natural sciences. Just as observations of the natural world enable us to explain and predict physical phenomena, so too the presence or absence of a particular passion allows us to explain and predict an individual's every action.<sup>4</sup>

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[I]f we compare these two cases, that of a person, who has very strong motives of interest or safety to forbear any action, and that of another, who lies under no such obligation, we shall find . . . that the only *known* difference betwixt them lies in this, that in the former case we conclude from *past experience*, that the person never will perform that action, and in the latter, that he possibly or probably will perform it.

(Hume 2000a, 312)

Further, because Hume sees the passions as primitive, irreducible entities of the individual mind, he construes them also as the ultimate motivations for actions. In particular, Hume's conception of the passions limits the role of reason in motivating actions: because of the nature of human motives, reason never constitutes a motivating force *in itself*. For Hume, reason is a purely inferential faculty that allows and regulates the influence of arguments on our beliefs. What reason does not have is any representational faculty. Anything that is before the mind must be derived from the senses or from reflection; reason in itself is impotent to produce any such mental representation. In particular, therefore, reason cannot produce an impression of pleasure or pain by itself, or an idea with similar content.<sup>5</sup> Yet Hume identifies exactly those reflective impressions, the passions, as the motivational causes of behavior. Because reason cannot produce these impressions, it cannot by itself cause actions. Thus, reason does not constitute a motivating force in itself, but, as we will show in section 6, it can form a motivating force *in interaction* with the passions. This qualification has important implications for interpreting Hume's views on the limits of reason and his explanation of human action.

Hume, it can be concluded, sees the passions as the fundamental *explanans* of actions.<sup>6</sup> He expresses this conviction unequivocally in his essays on economics, as when he states that "our passions are the *only* causes for labor" (Hume 1985s [1752a], 261, emphasis added); when he declares that people's borrowing habits depend *solely* on their *temper* (1985v [1752d], 299); and when he invokes the notion of an *infallible attraction*, "arising from the interests and passions" to explain the drain of the surplus of specie from a richer to a poorer country (1985x [1752e], 313).

The irreducibility of passions and their resistance to rational manipulation also have consequences for Hume's discussion of policy formulation. There, he argues against the attempt to reign in contradiction to the desires and tastes of the majority of subjects. Any policy by the state that aims to manipulate people's passions is doomed to fail. Instead, leaders must cater their laws to the passions of their subjects:

Sovereigns must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of thinking. A long course of time, with a variety of accidents and circumstances, are requisite to produce those great revolutions, which so much diversify the face of

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human affairs. . . . It is best policy to comply with the common bent of mankind, and give it all the improvements of which it is susceptible.  
(1985s [1752a], 260)

Given the irreducibility of passions, and the inability of reason to be a motivating force in itself, the policymaker is advised to take the fundamental human passions as a given. The sovereign should not attempt to influence his subjects in any direct way, because it would be futile: he cannot manipulate the relevant causal laws. Instead, a leader should design institutions and implement policies that accommodate the basic passions, the “common bent,” of individuals.

Thus Hume considers the passions as basic both in their functions as *explanans* and as parameters of policy advice. This aspect of his program is very much in accord with the idea, prominent in eighteenth-century thought, that human nature is to a large extent uniform. As Hume states, “It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations” (Hume 2000b, 150). The uniformity thesis, however, seems *prima facie* to collide with Hume’s approach to social change. The principal aim of his economic essays, after all, is to clarify the principles behind a state’s rising powers and the prospering of a nation. For this, he investigates the development of commerce and luxury consumption, the changes in the use of monetary means, and the progress of credit and international trade. His abundant use of historical examples in all of these essays reveals his interest in discovering the principles of change, of development, or—as one would say today—of evolution. Given the status of the passions as ultimate *explanans*, one might wonder how the uniformity thesis could be compatible with this historical outlook and historical method.

A correct understanding of the uniformity thesis dissolves the apparent incompatibility. It does not claim all humans share uniform and stable passions. Rather, the *relations* between passions and actions remain stable, while the actual passions vary between people.<sup>7</sup> Human nature is uniform in its “principles and operations,” not in its actual motivations, as he expresses in the *Treatise*:

Whether we consider mankind according to the difference of sexes, ages, governments, conditions, or methods of education; the same uniformity and regular operation of natural principles are discernible. Like causes still produce like effects; in the same manner as in the mutual action of the elements and powers of nature.

(Hume 2000a, 401)

Once the thesis is understood this way, causal uniformity neatly fits together with the passions’ irreducibility in Hume’s historical framework. The passions are basic for Hume in the sense that they motivate action; and

they are the basic impressions social scientists and policymakers deal with when understanding people's actions and making recommendations. But this does not imply that the passions are unchangeable. Instead, passions are subject to changes in conditions. By manipulating a person's situation—that is, by controlling for the “variety of circumstances and accidents” (Hume 1985s [1752a], 260) an individual might encounter—one can facilitate a gradual transformation of the passions. A systematic analysis of these environmental influences—a *natural history of passions*—discovers the regularities behind those transformations.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of the causal uniformity thesis, however, the relations between passions and actions remain constant; hence changes in people's passions explain changes in their actions, which in turn feature as the means to explain cultural and historical developments.

In his economic and political essays, Hume widely employs this framework of a natural history of passions to explain an increase in the industriousness of a nation's people. In particular, he applies this approach to three phenomena: (1) the increased desire for luxury goods, which in turn is caused by the increased provision of luxury goods through accelerated foreign trade (1985s [1752a], 264); (2) the increased desire for art or musical entertainment as a result of a refinement of taste, brought about through increased exposure to art or music (1985dd [1757], 235); and (3) the desire to apply oneself to one's employment as the result of the experience of pleasures derived from having an occupation in a professional society (1985v [1752d], 300). All these examples pursue the explanation of institutional change (the rise of luxury consumption, the emergence of a cultured society, the rise of a new work ethic) by reference to a change in individual actions based on a transformation of the motivating passions.

Nevertheless, while Hume's concept of the passions does not rule out their change or even manipulation, it imposes severe restriction on any such process. A human being is neither able to conjure up a new passion out of nothing, nor able to manipulate any of the existing ones. For that, it requires at least another passion, that is, another impression of pleasure derived from a new impression or idea. According to Hume, *any* transformation of passions must come about through the interaction of passions themselves. Thus the accounts of passion changes in his framework of a natural history of passions all employ the same underlying mechanism: to pit one passion against another. The motivating impulse of a passion can only be counter-balanced by a contrary passion: “Where two objects are contrary, the one destroys the other” (Hume 2000b, 106n). John Immerwahr calls this Hume's “theory of the predominant passion.”<sup>9</sup> This mechanism needs clarification, however, as Hume's notion of contrariness is quite complicated.

### **3. Influence of Contrariness on the Mental Appearance of Passions**

Hume offers two accounts of contrariness: either it occurs directly between passions, or between the causal effects of passions. Accordingly, that one

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passion “counterbalances” or destroys another can be understood either as affecting the existence of the second passion, or as affecting only the causal effect of that passion. In the first case, the passions are “directly contrary in their sensation” (Hume 2000a, 330), as in the case between pride and humility or love and hatred. Hume does not elaborate on this rather vague notion, as he thinks, “this decision [whether two passions are directly contrary] we always pronounce at first sight, without any enquiry or reasoning” (ibid., 70).

In the second case, the causal influences of two passions, but not the two passions themselves, cancel each other out. That is, two passions are contrary if they produce *contrary impulses* (Hume 2000a, 415). My anger, for instance, might dispose me to shout at you, while my love and respect for you, being stronger, cancels out the causal power of my anger and makes me speak to you about our conflict in a calm fashion. Love, Hume would say, is contrary to anger in this case, by overriding its causal effect, without eliminating the presence of anger itself (ibid., 492). In this case of contrariness, the passions are not inherently contrary, but contrary only to the extent that their effects cannot both pertain at the same time.

Employing both notions of contrary passions, Hume distinguishes three different outcomes when contrary passions are opposed:

‘Tis observable, that where the objects of contrary passions are presented at once, . . . it sometimes happens, that both the passions exist successively, and by short intervals; sometimes, that they destroy each other, and neither of them takes place; and sometimes that both of them remain united in the mind.

(Hume 2000a, 441)

Hume explains the different ways in which contrary passions interact by the difference in the relation between their objects—that is, the objects that causally trigger these passions.

If two different objects trigger contrary passions, these passions are experienced alternately, and do not have any effect on each other. If a political event fires my patriotism, for instance, and at the same time I am personally humiliated by failing an exam, then according to Hume, neither of the passions affects the other. Rather, I feel pride for my country, when I think of it, and I feel humiliated when I think of my poor intellectual performance. These sensations remain separate in the mind like “oil and vinegar” (Hume 2000a, 443), neither blending with nor affecting each other. Thus, the *prima facie* contrary passions are not contrary in either of the two notions Hume discusses.

If one and the same object arouses contrary passions, but the passions are not “directly contrary” and only contrary in their effects, then the stronger passion eliminates the effect of the weaker passion, without eliminating its existence. This happens in the case of my simultaneous love and anger for one and the same person. Both passions themselves continue to coexist

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within me (remain “united in the mind”) such that I feel anger and love at the same time, but my action will be driven by only one of the two passions.

In some cases, in which one and the same object arouses contrary passions of equal intensity, these passions cancel each other out. For this to take place, two conditions have to be fulfilled: “Contrary passions are not capable of destroying each other, except when their contrary movements exactly encounter,<sup>10</sup> and are opposite in their direction, as well as in the sensation they produce” (Hume 2000a, 442). Here, both types of contrariness have to be satisfied. For one, the causal effects of the passions have to be contrary. Exact opposition in this sense is attained only if the causal effects spring from one and the same object. Further, the passions themselves have to be contrary in their *direction*. Without being very clear on this notion, Hume seems to imagine passions as having a direction and intensity in their sensation, which can add up and cancel each other. Only then do contrary passions eliminate each other: “To excite any passion, and at the same time raise an equal share of its antagonist, is immediately to undo what was done, and must leave the mind at last perfectly calm and indifferent” (ibid., 278).

Hume thus explains the different possibilities resulting from a clash of two contrary passions by referring to the way their objects relate, and to the strength and direction of the passion aroused. In addition to this analysis, he points out two further ways in which contrary passions affect each other. The fourth scenario envisages a situation in which the mind is affected by the prospect of an event with uncertain outcomes. Here, the passions, arising from each of the uncertain outcomes, are fused into one new impression that is associated with the event.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in his *Dissertation on the Passions*, Hume discusses a fifth option, in which the weaker of the two contrary passions enhances the intensity of the stronger one.<sup>12</sup> For example, the pain and suffering a marathon runner experiences during a competition will not diminish his sense of triumph if he wins; rather, the suffering will intensify his feeling of pride and accomplishment.<sup>13</sup>

Altogether, passions have to satisfy three conditions to cancel each other: (1) they arise from the same object, (2) they have contrary directions, and (3) they are of the same intensity. Only then does the dynamic of passion have an effect on one’s mental state—leaving the mind “calm and indifferent”; the passions cease to exist as impressions of the mind. The restrictive conditions Hume identifies for mutual cancellation make clear that the dynamics of passions are, for the most part, not driven by the tendency of the mind to come to rest by eliminating contrary passions. Rather, the opposite holds: human beings do not necessarily act on the basis of unanimous, coherent passions, but on a jumble of passions that push in contrary directions.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the persistence of contrary passions is a central element of Hume’s concept of human nature, as he expresses most clearly in his essay “On Polygamy and Divorces”:

These principles of human nature, you’ll say, are contradictory: But what is man but a heap of contradictions! Though it is remarkable,

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that, where principles are, after this manner, contrary in their operation, they do not always destroy each other; but the one or the other may predominate on any particular occasion, according as circumstances are more or less favorable to it.

(Hume 1985m [1752c], 188)

Hume's concept of human motivation emphasizes diversity, conflict, and change. The mental states he employs as *explanans* and parameters for policy advice are not forced into the corset of consistency or coherence. For the most part, passions do not cancel each other out, but maintain their presence in the face of contrary passions. Hume therefore does *not* anticipate models of human motivation that are driven by logical principles and the overall consistency of the mind's content.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in his framework of passion change, all of the different kinds of contrariness discussed here play a key role.

#### **4. Refinement**

The transformation of passions manifests as a change in the causal effects of the totality of an individual's passions. This change of causal effects occurs when one or more newly emerged passions "tip the balance," so to speak, of the totality of passions. The question then is which conditions give rise to new passions that effect such a change?

Within the passions, Hume distinguishes between the violent and the calm. Humans are "by nature" fitted with the violent passions, or passions in the narrow sense; the extent to which they are susceptible to these passions marks their tempers. Some people may naturally be endowed with the calm passions, and in particular an appreciation for aesthetic and moral beauty. The rest of us, however, can cultivate the ability to *feel*<sup>16</sup> aesthetic and moral beauty through experience of successively finer differentiations—such as the active practice of an art, or the regular contemplation of beautiful objects—leading to a refinement in our tastes. Hume defines "delicacy of taste" as the state "Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition" (Hume 1985dd [1757], 235). Delicacy of taste depends on the subtlety and precision with which we can identify the features of our (external) impressions. The senses are like other bodily organs, whose regular employment leads to their heightened ability to perform an assigned task. But this enhanced ability to discriminate leads automatically, according to Hume, to an increase in the motivational force that comes with the appreciation of beauty: the desire to produce or to own a piece of art, or the desire to perform a good deed.

This is a new reason for cultivating a relish in the liberal arts. Our judgment will strengthen by this exercise: We shall form juster notions



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of life: Many things, which please or afflict others, will appear to us too frivolous to engage our attention: And we shall lose by degrees that sensibility and delicacy of passion, which is so incommodious.

(Hume 1985a [1741a], 6)

The cultivation of taste, then, leads to two separable effects. First, by increasing the sensitivity of the mind, new impressions widen the scope of passionate emotions. Objects and actions that may in the past have inspired indifference now create reflective impressions that can influence actions. Second, these newly acquired tastes have the power to counterbalance some of the violent passions. Refinement does not directly reduce the power of violent impressions; rather, through the mechanism discussed earlier, the new calm passions acquire greater force and dominate the causal effects of the violent passions:

The emotions which they [the tastes] excite are soft and tender. They draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited for love and friendship.

(Hume 1985a [1741a], 7)

But refinement is not restricted to the perception of art. Any sense that can provide pleasure can be refined. The pleasures of the palate, of providing “for friends, family, or every proper object of generosity or compassion,” and of “ambition, study, or conversation” (Hume 1985t [1752b], 269) can be increased by a cultivation of the sense and taste for them.<sup>17</sup>

We conclude that the change of passions through refinement proceeds in three steps. First, exercise develops a dormant sense faculty, which leads to an increase in (primary) impressions. Second, these primary impressions lead to an increase in secondary impressions, namely, passions for or against certain primary impressions. Third, these new passions—if they are strong enough—cancel out the effects of passions contrary to them, which previously caused the individual’s behavior. This is how refinement transforms the motivational dispositions of humans.

## 5. Passion and Economic Development

The mechanism of refinement together with the theory of predominant passions offers a foundation for Hume’s political and economic thought. His natural history of passions enables him to explain institutional changes, especially of economic institutions.<sup>18</sup> In particular, this framework provides the basis for his explanation of why the production and trade of consumption goods creates such an unstoppable dynamic of its own:

[Foreign Trade] rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury, which

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they never before dreamed of, raises in them the desire of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed.

(Hume 1985s [1752a], 264)

In this passage, it is exposure to luxury goods, rather than to works of art, that refines the taste. Seeing others indulging in luxury consumption, the observers themselves become sensitized and develop a taste for a “more splendid way of life.” The desire for a better life in turn spurs industriousness.<sup>19</sup> Engaging in commercial activity in order to satisfy one’s desires, one undergoes a second refinement, “craving . . . for exercise and employment” (Hume 1985v [1752d], 300), the taste for pure engagement and challenge for mind and body, regardless of its potential to satisfy specific desires. This passion finds its expression in the amassing of money or other financial resources, which in turn makes future commercial activity possible. This new desire for money now stands as a passion contrary to the desire for luxury goods. Even though the desire for luxury goods precedes and triggers a desire for money, according to Hume, the desire for money ultimately dominates; hence, the spendthrift feudal landlord is replaced by the economically oriented bourgeois. “It is an infallible consequence of all industrious professions, to . . . make the love of gain prevail over the love of pleasure” (Hume 1985v [1752d], 301).<sup>20</sup> One must be careful, however, not to read *refinement* as a positive evaluative term. What we described above (in section 4, “Refinement,”) is a central mechanism of Hume’s natural history of passions; the result of such a transformation is not necessarily good. Nevertheless, Albert Hirschman has argued that Hume is an uncompromising apologist of the new exchange-oriented society. According to that reading, Hume not only explains how refinement processes lead to the rise of love of gain and hence to the increase of commercial activity, but he also endorses this development as desirable. Commenting on Hume’s claim that “[i]t is an infallible consequence of all industrious professions, to . . . make the love of gain prevail over the love of pleasure,” Hirschman suggests that

Hume’s statement can stand as the culmination of the movement of ideas that has been traced [in this work]: capitalism is here hailed by a leading philosopher of the age because it would activate some benign human proclivities at the expense of some malignant ones—because of the expectation that, in this way, it would repress and perhaps atrophy the more destructive and disastrous components of human nature.

(Hirschman 1977, 66)

Hirschman’s thesis is that the modern age of commerce is ushered in as the result of the ascendancy of “interest” (understood as love of gain or “avarice, the spur of industry” (Hume 1985i [1752i], 93)) over love of pleasure and also over the more violent and disruptive passions. But Hume in fact takes a more ambivalent position regarding the love of gain, in that he allows that,

in certain cases, it may prove to be most disruptive. In speaking of the love of gain, Hume is not always as approving as Hirschman presents him:

All the other passions, besides this of interest, are either easily restrain'd, or are not of such pernicious consequences when indulg'd. . . . This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society.

(Hume 2000a, 491–92)

Love of gain, then, is sometimes a virtue, sometimes a vice. While it can counterbalance some of the passions that were traditionally seen as vicious (such as lust, gluttony, anger, and particularly sloth), as well as those that were viewed as especially disruptive (for example, glory and dominion), it can also lead to the suppression of passions that Hume regards as positive—namely, friendship, benevolence, love, and honor. To speak as Hirschman does of interest (in the narrow sense) as activating “some benign human proclivities at the expense of some malignant ones” is therefore a bit misleading. To be sure, the issue here is complicated. Hume does think that the love of gain is the driving force behind the development of commerce, and that the institutions of commerce in turn produce benefits for its participants. And again, as others have argued, Hume indeed hails specific aspects of commerce (for example, market contracts, uniform prices) as exerting such a beneficial influence.<sup>21</sup> But these results are beneficial *despite* the nature of interest in the narrow sense, not because of it.

Hume contrasts the narrow sense of the interested affection as “love of gain,” or “avarice,” with another, much more expansive meaning of “interest.” Hirschman himself points to this other meaning, when he states: “[In] the late sixteenth century, its meaning was by no means limited to the material aspects of a person’s welfare; rather, it comprised the totality of human aspirations” (Hirschman 1977, 32). Now, in the *Treatise*, the *Enquiries*, and the *Essays*, Hume typically uses *interest* in the more general sense Hirschman describes, namely, to refer to whatever is of concern to the individual (which may be a concern for oneself, or a concern for the well-being of others, such as family and friends).<sup>22</sup> This is especially the case whenever Hume speaks about the *true* interests of the individual. Hirschman, however, does not associate this more expansive concept of interest with Hume.<sup>23</sup> Instead he regards Hume as among those thinkers who *narrowed* the late-sixteenth-century concept of interest to mean essentially the desire for material gain.<sup>24</sup>

Hume does refer to this narrower concept, and he speaks of it as a “universal passion, which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons” (Hume 1985k [1742a], 113).<sup>25</sup> Note, however, that for Hume, interest in either the narrow sense (love of gain) or the broad sense (the sum total of aspirations of the individual) is a passion. Moreover, in either case, it is a *calm but*

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*strong* passion. How is it that love of gain or interest in the more general sense is a calm but strong passion? Hirschman's interpretation of the more general sense of interest is very useful here. It is a passion that involves, in some way or other, reason or reflection. We suggest that this is true of interest in the more narrow sense as well: reason is once again involved.

### **6. The Place of Reason**

But just what role does reason play in regard to interest, in either its broad or narrow senses? The question is important, for the proper resolution of this has important implications for the first of the additional issues raised above, regarding whether interest (in some sense or other of that term) represses the more violent passions.

How, then, is this idea of a "reasoned" or "reasonable" interest to be understood? Much has been written about Hume's claim that "reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume 2000a, 415). But the sense in which, for Hume, reason *serves* the passions has not been sufficiently elucidated.

For Hume, reason clearly plays an important role in deliberation. To be sure, its role is not to establish what our ends should be, but to establish what we ought to do, *given* our ends (which are set by the passions).<sup>26</sup> But in this context reason functions clearly as more than just the *slave* of the passions, for Hume insists that it is unreasonable when, "in exerting any passion in action, we choose means insufficient for the design'd end" (Hume 2000a, 416). And reason, in this context, not only makes a judgment, but exerts a powerful influence: "The moment we perceive . . . the insufficiency of any means our passions *yield to our reason* without any opposition" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Of course, reason does not dictate to passion. It simply makes clear what must be done if passions' objective is to be realized. This is true regardless of whether we are speaking about the very specific passion of love of gain, or the passion associated with the more general sense of the interests of the person.

Hume's commentators have also understood that reason does advise regarding the appropriate means to the ends that passions set. What has not been sufficiently emphasized is that, on Hume's account, reason has another function to perform, one in which it plays a more directly constraining role. In a number of places, Hume speaks of a passion that has been informed by reason as to the best manner in which to pursue it, namely, by *self-restraint* rather than impetuous, headlong pursuit. Hume develops this idea in one of the more remarkable passages of the *Treatise*:

'Tis certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counter-balance the love of gain, and render men fit members of society, by making them abstain from the possessions of others. . . . There is no passion . . . capable of controlling

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the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident, that the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty.

(Hume 2000a, 492)<sup>27</sup>

How are we to understand Hume's remark that the alteration "must necessarily take place upon the least reflection"? The question under reflection here is whether "the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty." But this reflection concerns a deliverance of instrumental reason—which is the one kind of reason Hume acknowledges as playing a role in the choice of an action. Connecting this with Hume's notion about refinements of a passion, we suggest that the natural way to interpret these remarks is to understand Hume as putting forward a distinct sense in which a passion can be refined, namely, by a reasoned reflection that the passion is better served by its being restrained than by allowing it to motivate action in an unrestrained manner. So interpreted, this is a form of refinement in which reason, then, plays a central role. It is thus not simply a matter of becoming more sensitized, as a more or less accidental result of increasingly nuanced experiences. But this means that, even though Hume is often characterized as denying the possibility of the rational criticism of the passions, certain kinds of passions—namely headlong or unconstrained passions—are subject to rational criticism, precisely on the grounds that when a passion is unconstrained it is less suited to achieve its objective than when it is constrained.

Interestingly, Hirschman does not know what to do with this passage. He suggests that counteracting a passion with itself is not "an easy operation to perform" (Hirschman 1977, 25), and remarks with deprecation that

One might of course quibble that to avow the need for some reason or reflection . . . means to introduce an alien element (which, moreover, is supposed to be the "slave of the passions") into an arena in which only passion is supposed to fight with passion.

(Hirschman 1977, 25)

But where is the flaw? Hirschman just is not clear about the role that reason plays in Hume's account of the passions, and this misunderstanding leads him to believe that only a passion can provide a countervailing force to another passion, excluding reason completely from this arena. This, however, misses the significance of there being a distinct kind of refinement in which reason plays a role.

Hume's account of the way that interest constrains itself is, indeed, puzzling. Returning to the last passage quoted, he states that self-restraint must "take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident that the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty." This remark seems

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to suggest that humans are capable of constraining themselves, and this by simply *resolving*, after due reflection, to take the more effective course of action—which is to constrain themselves to pursue their interest in a less headlong manner. However, it is hard to see how to fit this idea into his general account of the dynamics of the passions.

Somewhat later in the *Treatise*, Hume returns to this topic, and offers a different, and what many have taken to be a more plausible, account of self-restraint. He begins by noting that humans are subject to the infirmity of preferring their immediate interests to their greater, long-term interests. In so doing, they “act in contradiction to their known interest; and in particular . . . prefer any trivial advantage, that is present, to the maintenance of order in society” (Hume 2000a, 535). Moreover, and most importantly, this weakness will not be overcome by “the least reflection.” Indeed, due to the particular nature of the passions and the restricted role of reason, it is difficult to overcome this infirmity:

I may have recourse to study and reflection within myself; to the advice of friends; to frequent meditation, and repeated resolution: And having experienc'd how ineffectual all these are, I may embrace with pleasure any other expedient, by which I may impose a restraint upon myself, and guard against this weakness.

(Hume 2000a, 536–37)

Reason, then, in this case cannot shape the motivating passion. That is, a rational insight into the ineffectiveness of a certain way of acting is not sufficient to persuade the agent to choose differently—to prefer long-term to short-term advantage. All reason can do is uncover the inefficiency and identify an “external” way to deal with it. What he recommends is the expedient to which Ulysses resorts when he ties himself to the mast:

‘Tis evident such a remedy can never be effectual without correcting this propensity [to prefer the contiguous to the remote]; and as ‘tis impossible to change or correct anything material in our nature, the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest.

(Hume 2000a, 537)

This change of circumstances is to be accomplished by putting into place an external system of sanctions administered by magistrates, who serve at the pleasure of the citizens, and thus have an immediate interest in the execution of justice and the maintenance of civil order. In turn, the threat of the application of such sanctions motivates persons to look to their greater, longer-range good. Hume elaborates the argument, with many ramifications, into a general account of the origin of government.<sup>28</sup> For our discussion, however, the important point is that, while the constraints are

self-imposed and the passion that drives us to impose those constraints is interest itself, the constraints put into place are *external*. That is, a mental resolve to act in a certain way will not suffice.<sup>29</sup> There is, in all of this, a striking anticipation of how modern economics and game theory have chosen to deal with the issue of preference for short-term as opposed to long-term interests.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, an intriguing question remains: Regarding the problem posed by our preference for the more contiguous over the more remote, why does Hume insist that intellectual insight into the problem does *not* suffice—that we require more than a mere act of will? His stance is especially puzzling considering his earlier insistence, in the case of restraining interest from pursuing its objective in a headlong fashion, that the refinement of a passion requires only reasoned reflection. In the interest of space, we will have to save this last question for future consideration. It does seem clear, however, that Hume’s appeal, in the one case, to an act of will based on rational insight, and an appeal, in the other case, to an external device serves as a powerful reminder that we need a much more sophisticated account of practical reasoning, even within the Humean framework, than is captured in the simple idea of “choosing means sufficient to our ends.”

## 7. Conclusion

In discussing Hume’s dynamic framework of passion change, we have arrived at three main conclusions: First, passions are the basic *explanans* of human action, but change is a result of historical developments. Second, the historical development of commerce is driven by the rise of interest, but contrary to Hirschman’s thesis, Hume evaluates this passion ambivalently. Third, the version of interest that Hirschman neglects, but which is salient in Hume’s work, is not identical to love of gain; instead, it includes interests of a much more general sort, and also includes rational self-control through both “internal” and “external” restraints.

In his effort “to explain the principles of human nature,” Hume builds not on one foundation, but on two. On a first level, he sees the passions as basic, both in relation to explanation of human action and in policy advice. But on a second level, he develops a framework for the evolution of motivations, a natural history of the passions. For this framework, the mechanism of refinement and the theory of predominant passions are central. New passions emerge as a result of the development of one’s senses, and these new passions interact with the existing passions, either canceling out each other or counterbalancing each other’s causal influence on human action. This framework allows Hume to explain how situational changes regularly lead to changes in human action. In particular, it allows him to explain the rise of commerce as the rise of the love of gain, resulting from increased availability of consumption goods, the collapse of traditional concepts of the good life, and changed modes of production.

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When he explains the rise of commerce as driven by interest (in the narrow sense), we argued that Hume is aware of the potentially disruptive consequences of the dominance of this interest so understood. By showing this, we sought to correct a view that, since the publication of Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*, many have accepted as a definitive statement of Hume's intellectual contribution to economics and political economy. According to this view, Hume endorses commerce, because the passion that spurns its development will repress and harness the more destructive and malignant of the human passions. Hirschman investigates the political justifications for the rise of commerce—and it is true that Hume engages in many arguments to that end—but Hirschman does not manage to connect with some of the most interesting and original aspects of Hume's theory. He gives the impression that Hume sanctions the love of gain's rise to dominance itself. In contrast, we argued that it is a different understanding of "interest"—also closely related to the rise of commerce—to which Hume more often than not draws attention.

Finally, we considered the ways in which reason can influence motivation. We argued that Hume assigns reason a constraining role, but that he appears to speak of two quite different ways in which reason can constrain a passion—by either "external" or "internal" devices. The operation of both constraints leads to the formation of new passions through the process of a refinement mechanism, which in turn cancels out or counterbalances some existing passion. Thus, however this process of rational constraint is interpreted, Hume clearly assigns to reason a greater role than many have supposed.

### Notes

We wish to thank the editors of this volume, Joanne Grüne-Yanoff, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

- 1 Hume himself often presents this relation between passions and actions as a causal relation. He argues, e.g., that "our passions are the only causes for labor" (Hume 1985s [1752a], 261). We think that this is not only an equivocal manner of speaking about causes and constant conjunctions, as Hume at times explicitly distinguishes mere correlation from true causal correlation: "we mistake, as is too usual, a collateral effect for a cause" (Hume 1985u [1752c], 290). However, we cannot argue for this position here with the necessary depth and detail and therefore adhere to a more cautious terminology.
- 2 "A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possess'd with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high" (Hume 2000a, 415).
- 3 It is important to repeat that, despite this analysis, which consists of a causal analysis and the comparison of similarities between the different passions, Hume thinks of *all* passions as simple and nonreducible. This interpretation is supported by Ardal: "A simple perception cannot be analyzed into distinct parts. Yet Hume thinks that it can be characterized by pointing out its similarity to other



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- simple perceptions or its difference from them. One can also state the conditions under which it is found to arise, or, in other words, its causal conditions. Thus, for Hume, a simple perception is not just something that can only be pointed to or given a name. Many things may be predicated to it. I shall, indeed, emphasize that the bulk of the second book of the *Treatise* is concerned with stating the causal conditions for the emergence of simple impressions, and indicating various similarities between them” (Ardal 1989, 12).
- 4 “As the union between motives and actions has the same constancy, as that in any natural operations, so its influence on the understanding is also the same, in determining us to infer the existence of one from the other” (Hume 2000a, 404).
  - 5 For further discussion of Hume’s concept of purely *inferential* reason versus the Cartesian notion of *representing* reason, compare Garrett (1997, 26–27).
  - 6 Hume’s program has often been described as a Newtonian science of the mind. In particular, the identification of a corpuscular unit (the perceptions, or for the theory of action, the passions), the specification of an observational method (introspection), and the employment of the principle of association have lent credibility to such a claim. See, for example, Penelhum (1993, 120–21); for a cautioning perspective, see Jones (1982).
  - 7 Compare Forbes (1975, especially 113–21) for a discussion of this point. Forbes concludes that “the universal principles are to be regarded as abstractions from the concrete variety of human (= social) experience; Hume’s ‘general psychology’ is concerned with the function and mechanism, not the content of mind, which is various and supplied by social and historical circumstances.”
  - 8 The term *natural history* was coined by Rotwein, who explains further that Hume “frequently . . . sought to show that historical transformations in human behavior, e.g. in ‘habits, customs and manners’ were caused by the influence of various environmental changes on ‘human nature,’ or, in a word, could be couched in the form of ‘laws’” (Rotwein 1976, 119).
  - 9 Immerwahr (1994, 230).
  - 10 To “reencounter” is “to meet, as in battle,” “to skirmish,” or “to duel.”
  - 11 “Impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and like colors, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole” (Hume 2000a, 366).
  - 12 “An opposition of passions commonly causes a new emotion in the spirits . . . This new emotion is easily converted into the predominant passion, and in many instances, is observed to encrease its violence, beyond the pitch, at which it would have arrived, had it met no opposition” (Hume 1997, 176).
  - 13 Compare Immerwahr (1994, 230).
  - 14 Our conclusion here is in agreement with Baier, who writes that Hume “portrays opposed passions as mainly alternating, wheeling us about from love of undeserved praise to contempt for our flatterers, from disinterested benevolent love to a “great partiality in our favour” (Hume 2000a, 321). Hume had written in Book 1 that “if you wheel about a burning coal with rapidity, it will present to the senses an image of a circle of fire” (Hume 2000a, 35). The fiery circling of our successive passions allows many that threaten to extinguish each other to wheel together, without this threat being realised” (Baier 1991, 145).
  - 15 Recently expressed views that claim Hume as a predecessor of modern economic theory do not sufficiently take into account these differences between Hume’s notion of contrariness and the notion of consistency employed in modern microeconomics. For examples of such a claim, see Soule (2000, 153): “Hume’s account of human nature does not conflict with modern economic theory; rather, it supplements it by explaining the source of preference”; or Diaye and Lapidus (2002). In Hume’s framework, people’s actions change not because they adjust

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- their passions according to a criterion of logical consistency of the sentences expressing these passions, nor to any other criterion of coherence of the passions. While this is one of the central tenets of contemporary microeconomics and decision theory, it is not central to Hume's psychological theory.
- 16 That we *feel* beauty—instead of perceiving it—is of course central to Hume's concept of moral and aesthetic sentiments: "Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived" (Hume 2000b, 210).
  - 17 In an influential paper, Stigler and Becker (1979) have developed this mechanism of refinement for contemporary preference theory. Exposure to activities like listening to music, playing football, or consuming drugs increases our ability to derive satisfaction from such experiences, and thus our desire to continue or repeat them rises as well. Note that the authors speak of improved information, instead of speaking of the refinement of sense organs; the underlying idea is, however, similar.
  - 18 This aspect of Hume's work inspires Skinner to compare Hume with the German Historical School and the American Institutionalists (Skinner 1993, 248).
  - 19 In this particular explanation of the rise of industriousness, the difference between Hume and his close friend Adam Smith becomes quite obvious. Both Hume and Smith endeavored to combine a theory of the mind with a political and economic theory (Skinner 1979, 90–93; 1993, 246). But their respective cognitive models, on which they based their economic theories, are quite distinct. For Hume, the development of commerce begins with the increased desire for luxury goods. For Smith, however, the development starts with the increase in capital accumulation. One might therefore speak of a Humean "demand driven" and a Smithian "supply driven" history of economic development (Davis 2003, especially 273–76, 281–83, 295–96). It is thus largely correct to portray Hume as an antirationalist in relation to his model of institutional development, and to contrast this with Smith's rationalism, which allows reason to guide the self to choose prudent and frugal courses of action. However, the complexity of Hume's model needs to be stressed again. We emphasize the distinction between (i) direct and (ii) indirect manipulation—between (i) the concept that somehow reason itself can "take over" and motivate actions and (ii) the concept that agents are sometimes able to design their future environment in such a way that their own passions will motivate them to do what is in their long-term interest. In section 6 we will argue that Hume allows for the possibility of indirect change of passion. We thus show that rationality has a role in passion formation without Hume being a closet rationalist, and that Hume's and Smith's cognitive models indeed remain fully distinct.
  - 20 A note of caution is necessary here. While the passage quoted from "Of Interest" seems unambiguous, a reading of the essay "Of Refinement in the Arts" raises some doubts. In the latter text, Hume expresses reservation about the dominance of any excessive desire: "The more men refine upon pleasure, the less they indulge in excesses of any kind: because nothing is more destructive to true pleasure than such excesses" (Hume 1985t [1752b], 271). If this passage is read as part of Hume's explanatory program, it contradicts his claim that the love of gain will ultimately prevail over the love of pleasure. Love of gain, if understood as the desire to exclusively use all gains for the sheer amassment of riches, can certainly be deemed excessive; and, since Hume contrasts it with the love of pleasure, it cannot generate more true pleasure than any other desire fulfilled. However, we think that the above passage should not be read as part of his explanatory program. "Of Refinement in the Arts" is a normative tract on the value of refinements of the passions, in which Hume argues that no passion can be judged vicious in itself. As part of that argument, he appeals to an Aristotelian

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- average principle, which identifies any excess as irrational. But even here he has to qualify the sense in which it is irrational: only for those seeking true pleasure is it irrational to indulge in excesses of any kind. However one defines this true pleasure, we are convinced that Hume here expresses a normative judgment, which ultimately does not touch on the question of explanation. The economical bourgeois might be an irrational miser; his actions are predictable nonetheless.
- 21 Compare Schabas (1994) and the essay by Richard Boyd in this volume.
  - 22 See, in particular, the discussion about nearer and more remote interests in Hume (2000a, 534–39), and virtually all references to interests (e.g., self-interest, self-love) in the *Enquiry*. Of the more than 20 such references in the *Essays*, all invoke interest in the broader sense.
  - 23 Hirschman may, of course, be correct that this more narrow view of interest was characteristic of the wider circle of thinkers in Hume’s time, but it does not capture what is distinctive about Hume’s own view.
  - 24 This becomes clear when Hirschman discusses “the eventual identification of interest in its original broad sense with one particular passion, the love of money” (Hirschman 1977, 54) and points to Hume as the leading advocate of this development. His evidence for this claim, however, is meager; all he offers is to quote Hume speaking of avarice “without bothering to disguise it as ‘interest’” (ibid.).
  - 25 Hume sometimes refers to the love of gain as avarice (Hume 1985i [1741i], 93). But, in turn, he characteristically speaks of avarice as excessive love of gain, that is, as a vice (Hume 1985j [1741j], 570). For interest as a matter of love of gain, see Hume (2000a, 491–92) and also Hume (1985a [1741a], 7).
  - 26 “‘Tis obvious, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry’d to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction. ‘Tis also obvious that this emotion rests not here, but making us cast our view on every side, comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation. But ‘tis evident in this case, that the impulse arises not from the reason, but is only directed by it” (Hume 2000a, 414).
  - 27 See also Hume (2000a, 497, 521, 537, 543). Hume’s idea of a reasoned self-restraint figures as well in a remark he makes about pleasure: “The more men refine upon pleasure, the less will they indulge in excesses of any kind; because nothing is more destructive to true pleasure than such excesses” (Hume 1985t [1752b], 271).
  - 28 This is also the reason behind the origin of conventions more generally. Compare Hume (1998, app. 3).
  - 29 It is interesting to note that this second way of thinking about self-restraint reflects a deep underlying connection between this part of the *Treatise*, and the earlier arguments in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. In the *Leviathan*, it does not suffice for men to grasp that the laws of nature are but theorems of prudence—and thus fully in their interest; they must be reinforced by the creation of a Sovereign Power, that is, the Leviathan itself. We are indebted to Tatsya Sakamoto for reminding us of this point.
  - 30 We have in mind a large body of literature, starting with a watershed paper by Strotz (1956), which provoked further explorations by many important economists, including Hammond (1976), Yaari (1977), Kydland and Prescott (1977), and Elster (1984). More recently, Ainslie (1992) has offered a most interesting discussion.