

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **British Journal for the History of Philosophy**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3223/>

---

**Published paper**

Cohen, A. (2005) *In defence of Hume's historical method*, British Journal for the History of Philosophy, Volume 13 (3), 489 - 502.

---

## In Defence of Hume's Historical Method<sup>1</sup>

Alix Cohen

A tradition among certain Hume scholars, best known as the 'New Humeans', proposes a novel reading of Hume's work, and in particular of his conception of causality.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper is to conduct a similar move regarding Hume's historical method. It is similar for two reasons: firstly, it is intended to reintegrate Hume's theory into present-day debates on the nature of history; and secondly, the reading I propose is directed against the standard interpretation of Hume's history. This interpretation claims that in spite of being a historian, Hume misunderstands the nature of both historical knowledge and the historical enterprise. In other words, the Humean methodology would be incompatible with a genuine historical practice. This censure is based upon three particular criticisms:

- (1) The criticism of ahistoricalism: Hume believes human nature is an unchangeable substratum, and thus cannot account for historical change.
- (2) The criticism of parochialism: Hume is trapped in his own historical province<sup>3</sup>, and thus understands other times in the light of his own.
- (3) The criticism of moral condescension: Hume presumes the same standard is applicable throughout history, and thus judges the past according to his own moral standard.

I shall argue that these criticisms are the result of a misunderstanding of what Hume means to accomplish through his investigation of history and that moreover, he is aware of these pitfalls.

Hume's theory faces a difficulty essential to any philosophical analysis of history. History is no doubt the narrative of changes in the past. But if men are perpetually subject to change through history, how can the historian hope to understand and account for their behaviour? In other words, if there is no constancy of human nature, is he not condemned either to have a parochial knowledge of history (i.e. understand it in his own terms), or to view different historical times as alien (i.e. be unable to make sense of them)? But if he presupposes a minimal constancy of human nature, a constancy that is sufficient to secure the possibility of his understanding of other times, is he not missing the very nature of history in ruling out *a priori* fundamental historical differences?

I hold that Hume's historical method handles this difficulty insofar as any historian can.

To support my claim, I will show why the three main criticisms of Hume's theory are unfounded. In the first section, I examine the criticism of ahistoricalism and suggest that Hume's twofold theory of human nature is the means to rebut it: he holds, on the one hand, that human nature is uniform enough to allow historical understanding, but, on the other hand, that the influence of the context on the social nature of man leaves sufficient room to account for historical change. I then consider the criticism of parochialism and show that the key to the problem relies on the principle of sympathy: it should be understood as the condition of possibility of historical knowledge, for it makes historical understanding possible and sets up its limits. Finally, I look into the criticism of moral condescension and argue that Hume's theory cannot be charged with it. To support my claim, I draw a parallel between Hume's theory of historical interpretation and contemporary theories of the principle of charity.

### 1. Ahistoricalism

Some commentators criticise Hume's theory of history for being fundamentally – and paradoxically – ahistorical. For instance, Fischer argues that Hume's history “constitutes a fallacy”, the fallacy of the universal man, which assumes that a people or individuals are intellectually and psychologically the same in all times, places and circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Stern claims that “Hume maintained the thesis of an invariable human nature”.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Black agrees when he writes: “Hume sees only similarities”; he “did not grasp the elements of the problem [of historical explanation], because he was dominated [...] by the belief that human nature was uniformly the same at all times and places”.<sup>6</sup>

These commentators' conviction that Hume believes human nature is uniform and immutable leads them to conclude that his theory of history is ahistorical. Their interpretation is supported by the much quoted passages of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries* where Hume claims that there is a great uniformity amongst men. The most famous is probably the following:

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. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes [...] Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular (*Enquiry*, 83).<sup>7</sup>

Taken literally, this quote seems to suggest that Hume does believe in a uniformity of human nature. But if it is the case, how are we to understand the numerous quotes from the *Essays* which imply the contrary?<sup>8</sup> I shall argue that the criticism of ahistoricalism is based on a misunderstanding of Hume's historical method.<sup>9</sup> To support my claim, I will try to reconcile the 'uniformity passages' and the 'diversity passages', and show how Hume can hold a 'historical theory of history' without being inconsistent with his theory of human nature.

At the root of these commentators' misunderstanding is Hume's attempt to accommodate two apparently contradictory requirements:

- (a) Human nature should not be immutable, to allow the possibility of historical change.
- (b) Human nature must be in some way uniform, to allow the possibility of understanding by historians.

The key to the relationship between the uniformity and the diversity of human nature is to place the uniformity passages mentioned above in their proper context. They occur as part of the argument that human beings, like other parts of nature, are governed by causal laws.<sup>10</sup>

Where would be the foundation of morals, if particular characters had no certain or determinate power to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions? [...] It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage either in science or action of any kind without acknowledging the doctrine of necessity, and this [includes] inference from motive to voluntary actions, from characters to conduct (*Enquiry*, 89-90).

But the necessity of these laws – which are derived from historical experience in a wide sense – is always inferred. Because of its empirical origin, it is subject to variation. In other words, the constancy of human nature in history is open to the influence of context: “Man is a very variable being, and susceptible of many different opinions, principles, and rules of conduct. What may be true, while he adheres to one way of thinking, will be found false, when he has embraced an opposite set of manners and opinions”.<sup>11</sup> The causes that constitute the influence of circumstances, and thus explain these differences, are what Hume calls “moral causes”.

By moral causes, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us. Of this kind are, the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which people live, the situation of the nation with regards to its neighbours, and such like circumstances (*Of National Character*, 198).

Thus, the principles of human nature are similar to the principle of gravity; and the particular circumstances in which each society finds itself are comparable to the “inclinations of the ground”.<sup>12</sup> For instance, culture deeply influences which qualities are found to be useful or agreeable, and so culture, rather than nature, determines the qualities that a people will find of merit.<sup>13</sup>

We must not, however, expect that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions (*Enquiry*, 85).

This point, far from being anecdotal, has been historically very influential, notably on Adam Smith: “The different situations of different ages and countries are apt, in the same manner, to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality that is either blameable or praiseworthy vary, according to that degree which is usual in their country, and in their own times”.<sup>14</sup> If the moral sentiments of the individual are the expression of the general sentiments of the society of which he is a member, it is to be expected that moral standards will vary according to the conditions of the different societies in which they arise. Similarly, knowledge is an essentially social phenomenon, requiring the participation of others from whom one learns, and from whom one requires endorsement. Our beliefs are anchored in acquired customs, learned practices and conventions, and inherited traditions: “all human institutions [...] are in continual fluctuation”;<sup>15</sup> “every being, however seemingly firm, is in continual flux, and change”.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, far from claiming human nature is substantial (i.e. not subject to change), Hume merely accounts for the possibility of causal inference for human behaviour while leaving room for historical change. Contrary to the interpretations of Fischer, Stern and Black, the passages regarding the uniformity of human nature do not show that Hume believes, implicitly or explicitly, in a constancy of human nature which entails that history simply

repeats itself. Constancy of human nature is a principle that makes the science of man, and history in particular, possible. Hence, the key to resolving Hume's alleged ahistoricalism is to distinguish between minimal constancy and substantial uniformity. As I have shown, the former, unlike the latter, allows a wide range of political, social, moral and cultural differences.

However, Hume's response to the criticism of ahistoricalism leads to a second type of difficulty. If Hume's theory makes room for historical change, how can the Humean historian reach and understand concrete historical differences? In other words, how can Hume's theory allow the historian to escape from his own historical province? I shall examine this issue in the context of the criticism of parochialism.

## 2. Parochialism

The second criticism commonly directed at Hume's theory of history, the criticism of parochialism, is that Hume unwarily understands – or one should say misunderstands – other times in the light of his own time. This claim is based on the belief that his theory of human nature does not allow him to relate to different times and values, and thus confines him to a vision of man modelled on the eighteenth century Scottish gentleman. For instance, Collingwood claims that “no one in his time had done enough work on the history of thought to know that both the science and the experience of an eighteenth century European were highly peculiar historical facts, very different from those of other peoples and other times. Nor was it yet realized that, even apart from the evidence of history, men must have thought in very different ways when as yet they were hardly emerged from the ape”.<sup>17</sup>

Peter Jones, in his paper *Hume on Context, Sentiment and Testimony*, sets the pitfall of parochialism back in the context of the debate set by d'Alembert: one does not know a country simply by owning a map of it; one must undertake the journey oneself.<sup>18</sup> The issue of historical shifts of meaning and beliefs is thus central to seventeenth and eighteenth century debates, in particular in theology, and occasions numerous problems for historians. As Jones makes clear, with no intervening medium across separate points of time, they cannot rely on an unchanging content beneath linguistic variation, and may be unable to work out what was being said at a particular time.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, historians have access to information denied to the agent before the event – namely, the actual outcome, the long-term consequences, and the changing significance that may be assigned over time to what happened – and it can lead them to misinterpret or

misunderstand the occurrence of an event by over-intellectualising an agent's behaviour. However, against this tendency, prominent in thinkers such as Adam Smith or William Robertson, Hume advocates that historians should not ascribe intentions and motives to an agent of which the agent is unaware.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, contrary to Collingwood, I shall argue that Hume is concerned with the risk of parochialism and that, moreover, he is not guilty of it. I will show that for the Humean historian, the principle of sympathy is the means to escape from his own particular historical province and bridge the gap between the perspective of the agent and that of the spectator.

I believe that in order to overcome historical shifts in meaning and beliefs, historical practice requires a 'shift of the self' allowed in Hume's theory by the principle of sympathy. It is in this sense that sympathy should be understood as the condition of possibility of historical knowledge. By its means, the historian can both escape from his historical province and reach different ones. Firstly, it eliminates the partiality of a spectator in enabling him to get away from his idiosyncratic point of view. Applied to history, it ensures the historian can escape from his own historical province, and thus eliminates his partiality. Secondly and conversely, sympathy ensures participation in the pleasure and pain of people whose situations are remote and indifferent to us. In other words, it transforms an indifferent spectator into an involved and concerned one. Applied to history, it allows the historian to 'become part of' historical events.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the two functions of the principle of sympathy operate a 'decentralisation' of the self and its primitive point of view: both from partiality to impartiality, and from indifference to concern. This shift plays a fundamental role in the historical method; it allows the historian to be part of distant historical events without being partial. Consequently, the common feature of sympathy's functions is that it is a principle of communication.

No quality of human nature is more remarkable [...] than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive *by communication* their inclinations and sentiments, *however different from, or even contrary to our own* (*Treatise*, 316; my emphasis).

Sympathy allows the communication of the feelings of agents belonging to other times and places in getting over the distance between the historian and his object through the addition of a psychological dimension. It leads him to feel other's passions, sentiments and even opinions: "This is the nature and cause of sympathy, and 'tis after this manner we *enter so deep into* the opinions and affections of others".<sup>22</sup> But as with any type of communication,

communication by means of sympathy is mediated. We can only apprehend others' states of mind through signs, and in the historian's case, through the narration of their actions.

When any affection is infus'd by sympathy, it is at first known only by its *effects*, and by those external *signs* in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. [...] However instantaneous this change of the idea into the impression may be, it proceeds from certain views and reflections which will not escape the strict scrutiny of a philosopher (*Treatise*, 317; my emphasis).

Sympathy puts us on the track of recovering the motives, intentions and reasons which inform agents' actions. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to reach them. As Hume's reference to the notion of 'sign' implies, the historian is compelled to use actions as signs of the agent's motives and reasons since they are not immediately available to him. Thus, the only way to reach intentions is through causal inferences from actions to motives, as is the case in moral judgements.<sup>23</sup> These inferences can be seen as pieces of moral reasoning: to understand a moral cause is to have an internal grasp of an agent's action, working through practical reasoning the conclusion of which is the idea of the action. In this sense, Hume's historical method can be understood as a hermeneutic approach to historical data.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, contrary to Collingwood's claim, Hume's history is far from being parochial. However, Hume's response to the criticism of parochialism leaves out a correlated issue, namely the issue of moral condescension. I have shown that it is through the means of sympathy that he can escape from his own historical province. In this sense, sympathy is the condition of possibility of historical understanding: it allows the Humean historian to reach different times and values, and thus he cannot be held accountable for understanding other times in the light of his own.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the fact that sympathy is the means to reach other times and places does not preclude Hume from judging them according to his own moral standard.

### **3. Moral condescension**

The criticism of moral condescension can be understood as a moral version of the criticism of parochialism. It argues that Hume judges the values of other times with a standard of his own time. For instance, Greig claims that Hume "judged the past as if it were the present [and] took for granted that the same standard must be apt to past centuries as well".<sup>26</sup> Contrary to this charge, I would like to suggest that far from being morally condescending, Hume views



different ages from the inside and tries to show how customs that appear barbarous to us make sense after all. To support my claim, I will argue that Hume's conception of historical explanation is underpinned by the belief that people's behaviour, attitudes and values make sense for themselves. In other words, Hume presupposes a certain form of 'rationality' behind agents' conduct.<sup>27</sup>

First of all, a passage from Hume's *History of England* provides evidence of his awareness of the pitfall of moral condescension: "it seems unreasonable to judge of the measures, embraced during one period, by the maxims, which prevail in another".<sup>28</sup> The fundamental premise underlying this affirmation is that the various maxims which belong to different times have a *raison d'être*. Following Hume's endeavour, other Scottish historians, and William Robertson in particular, address this issue by assessing every event and historical character "by the principles and maxims of their own age, not by those of another".<sup>29</sup> In this sense, for Robertson as for Hume, to be faithful and impartial, historians need not write only contemporary history.

To have a better grasp of Hume's specific point, I would like to relate his theory of historical interpretation to contemporary theories of the principle of charity.<sup>30</sup> The linguistic and logical dimensions put aside, I believe Hume and Davidson, Quine or Putnam have a similar concern for agents' rationality. They share a view of the principle of charity as the condition of possibility of interpretation in the sense that they both presuppose there is something in common between us and the people we interpret. Contemporary theorists understand this common feature in terms of rationality, whilst I believe Hume would rather formulate it in terms of a common humanity of which rationality is just one component, passions and sentiments being the main elements at play. And this presupposition is legitimated by a deficit of empirical data – a deficit that is common to the philosopher and the historian, as the following quote exemplifies:

Most historians are inclined to blame his choice [Oliver Cromwell's rejection of the crown]; but he must be allowed *the best judge of his own situation* [...] And in such complicated subjects, the alteration of a very minute circumstance, *unknown to the spectator*, will often be sufficient to cast the balance, and render a determination, which, in itself, may be uneligible, very prudent, or even absolutely necessary to the actor (*History of England*, VI, 97; my emphasis).

Since he does not, and cannot, know everything about the agent's situation, Hume is led to presuppose that given the circumstances, the agent's choices must have made sense for himself.<sup>31</sup> The best example of the application of the Humean form of the principle of charity can be found in *A Dialogue*.

In *A Dialogue*, Hume examines some social practices that appear particularly alien to modern spectators, practices such as “the Greek loves”, “the marriage of half-brothers and sisters”, and French gallantry.<sup>32</sup> He wants to show that the external description of any practice is bound to make it look incomprehensible or immoral: “There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons”.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, Hume's historical method consists in tracing back the causes of the emergence of these ‘alien’ customs. For instance,

The Greek loves arose from a very innocent cause, the frequency of the gymnastic exercises among that people; and were recommended, though absurdly, as the source of friendship, sympathy, mutual attachment, and fidelity; qualities esteemed in all nations and all ages (*A Dialogue*, 334).

Hume can make sense of the “Greek loves” by ‘putting himself in their shoes’, and thus giving a causal account of their occurrence. This account takes into consideration both the influence of the context (here the frequency of gymnastic) and the principles of human nature (here friendship). Hence, I would like to suggest that the implicit assumption of *A Dialogue* is that we can understand and account for actions and values that look barbarous or alien at first sight by showing that they are motivated by reasons which can make sense, even for us. Guided by the principle of charity, the work of the historian consists in recovering these reasons through moral reasoning and sympathy.<sup>34</sup>

Surely, there are disparities between the contemporary understanding of the principle of charity and the minimal rationality presupposed by Hume. Firstly, far from building its conception of rationality on logical consistency, the Humean concept of rationality is based on what has been called ‘the impious maxim of the ancients’, that is to say the belief that agents are motivated by a concern for their own good.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, and more importantly for our focus, a fundamental difference between Hume and his ‘charitable’ descendants is that Hume's principle of charity has a wider scope: it is charitable to reasonings Hume himself does not endorse. By means of sympathy, he can mirror the mechanisms leading to people's beliefs and behaviour, no matter how cranky or flawed they are. In this sense, the Humean

slogan could be ‘understanding without endorsing’<sup>36</sup>. Hence, it differs from the Davidsonian principle of charity, a principle that has been seen as too standardised and limited to be genuinely charitable.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, the comparison between Hume and contemporary theories of the principle of charity supplements our understanding of Hume’s historical method in underlining one of its fundamental characteristics: far from being morally condescending, it is primarily charitable towards historical agents. Hence, the fundamental role of the principle of sympathy in Hume’s philosophy should not only be understood as a means to account for the communication of opinions and emotions. It is also – and perhaps more importantly – a certain outlook on human nature and social interaction that is underpinned by the belief that people’s behaviour and values, no matter how different from ours, make sense.

## Conclusion

The intention of this essay was to rehabilitate Hume’s theory of history and more particularly, to defend Hume’s historical method against three criticisms. In the first section, I argued against the criticism of ahistoricalism that Hume’s theory of human nature is subtle enough to allow a distinction between minimal constancy and substantial uniformity: the former, contrary to the latter, allows a wide range of political, social, moral and cultural differences. I then turned to the criticism of parochialism and showed how the principle of sympathy allows the Humean historian to escape from his own historical province and reach other times and places. In this sense, I suggested that sympathy should be understood as the condition of possibility for historical knowledge. Finally, I considered the criticism of moral condescension and drew a parallel between Hume’s method and contemporary uses of the principle of charity in order to show that far from being condescending, Hume’s approach to historical explanation is genuinely charitable.

As indicated in the introduction, my rehabilitation of Hume’s historical method has been inspired by the move operated by the ‘New Humeans’ regarding Hume’s philosophy of science. In this sense, I believe the reading I have put forward can similarly advance the debate beyond strictly Humean textual concerns to contemporary philosophical issues of history and historical method. Thus, from the arguments expounded in this essay, I would like to suggest that Hume’s historical method is in fact superior to many of its present day rivals, and even to the very theoreticians who criticise him. More precisely, Collingwood’s theory of historical re-enactment – just as the theories of *Verstehen* such as Dilthey’s – can now be seen

as more limited than Hume's. For instance, none of them can account for agents' failures or irrational choices.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the difference between Hume and his successors seems to rely on the question of the limits of historical explanation: through the principle of sympathy and an extended generosity towards historical agents, the scope of the Humean historian is both wider and more charitable.

Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented for the conference "Hume Studies in Britain II" at the University of Edinburgh in September 2002. I would like to thank all the participants for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank Edward Craig, Simon Blackburn, Cain Todd, Richard Gray and an anonymous referee of this journal for their advice and support.

<sup>2</sup> The New Humeans support a 'sceptical realist' reading of Hume's philosophy. See Read and Richman (ed.) [2000]: *The New Hume Debate* (London: Routledge).

<sup>3</sup> By 'historical province', I mean a historical period constituted by particular norms and values.

<sup>4</sup> D. H. Fischer [1971]: *Historian's Fallacy: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London: Routledge and K. Paul), 203-206.

<sup>5</sup> A. Stern [1962]: *Philosophy of History and the Problem of Values* (S'Gravenhage : Mouton), 147.

<sup>6</sup> J.B. Black [1965]: *The Art of History: A Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New-York), 77-216.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Hume [1978]: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 547 (hereafter quoted as *Treatise*) and *A Dialogue*, in Hume [1902]: *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 336 (hereafter quoted as *Enquiry*).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, "it is not fully known [...] what may be expected from mankind from any great revolution in their education, customs, or principle" ("Of Civil Liberty", in Hume [1994]: *Political Essays*, ed. by K. Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 51).

<sup>9</sup> This misunderstanding is strengthened by a confusion between history and its use for the science of man. According to Hume, "the advantages found in history seem to be of three kinds, as it amuses the fancy, as it improves the understanding, and as it strengthens virtue" (*Of the Study of History*, in Hume [1987]: *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. by E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics), 510 (hereafter quoted as *Essays*)). Thus, nothing in history as such involves the task of searching for similarities. But being the analysis of the collective memory of mankind, history provides the philosopher with the material in which he can discern the laws of nature at work: history "furnish[es] us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour" (*Enquiry*, 83). It is in the material supplied by history that the science of man uncovers the similarities that are the foundations of its laws. Therefore, Hume makes it clear that we should distinguish between history and its use within the framework of the science of man.

---

<sup>10</sup> We do operate every day on the assumption that human behaviour is, on the whole, regular and predictable: “Were a man whom I know to be honest and opulent, and [...] with whom I lived in intimate friendship, to come into my house, where I am surrounded with my servants, I rest assured that he is not to stab me before he leaves it in order to rob me of my silver Standish” (*Enquiry*, 100).

<sup>11</sup> “Of Commerce” in *Political Essays*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> “The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the same mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the same principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses” (*A Dialogue*, 333).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. my “Hume and the Notion of Moral Progress”, *Hume Studies*, vol. XXVI, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Smith [1976]: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), V.2.7, 204.

<sup>15</sup> “Of the Coalition of Parties”, in *Essays*, 495.

<sup>16</sup> “Of the Immortality of the Soul”, in *Essays*, 597. This interpretation is supported by Hume’s theory of historical evidence. A central problem for historians is that their relation to the past is mediated by documents conveying evidence from historical agents. According to Hume, the authenticity of a fact is established through truthful testimony, while the truthfulness of a witness is established through the degree of probability of the fact. Thus, the historian is related to the historical witness by the belief in a continuity of human nature.

<sup>17</sup> R.G. Collingwood [1973]: *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 82.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Jones [1999]: ‘Hume on Context, Sentiment and Testimony’ in *Religion and Hume’s Legacy*, ed. by Phillips and Tessin (London: MacMillan), 252 refers to d’Alembert (1770): *Mélanges de Littérature*, I.99 (hereafter quoted as *Mélanges*).

<sup>19</sup> See for instance “It is almost as if one were trying to express [a] proposition by means of a language whose nature was being imperceptibly altered, so that the proposition was successively expressed in different ways representing the different states through which the language had passed. Each of these states would be recognised in the one immediately neighbouring it; but in a more remote state we would no longer make it out (*Mélanges*, I.47).

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Hume saves some ground for the intentional action of Henry VII, and says that he probably “foresaw and intended this consequence, because the constant scheme of his policy consisted in depressing the great, and exalting churchmen, lawyers, and men of new families, who were more dependant on him” (Hume [1983]: *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), vol. III, chapter XXVI, 77). Robertson, on the other hand, both in the *History of Scotland* and in his subsequent treatment of the subject in *Charles V*, does not seem to be prepared to concede it to Henry VII and Henry VIII. It was not through enlightened self-interest that Henry VIII accomplished the depression of the nobility, but through the unpredicted outcome of his blind rapaciousness and tyrannical aspirations. For a detailed account, see Daniele Francesconi [1999]: ‘William Robertson on Historical Causation and Unintended Consequences’, *Cromohs*, vol. 4. Echoing Hume’s warning not to “assign causes which never existed” (“Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”, in *Essays*, 113), Adam Ferguson also deplores the tendency to ascribe intention and design where none existed: “we ascribe to a previous design [...] what no human wisdom could foresee, and what, without the concurring humour and disposition of his age, no authority could enable an individual to execute” (Adam Ferguson [1966]: *A Treatise on Civil Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 123).

---

<sup>21</sup> One might object that sympathy, far from enabling Hume to escape from parochialism, entails parochialism for it presupposes a common ground between the historian and his object of study. Yet, in so far as this objection is valid, it applies to any historian since no historical method can hope to understand radically alien beings. Thus, as already shown, Hume maintains a minimal constancy of human nature which outlines the limits of both the principle of sympathy and historical understanding.

<sup>22</sup> *Treatise*, 319 (my emphasis). In this sense, one of the specific features of sympathy, and thus of the historical accounts on which they are based, is that although it may potentially be predicated of every human being, it is done in a way that is always singular and determinate. Therefore, when George Sabine writes that Hume “neglect[s] the unique and individual aspect of historical events and persons”, he completely overlooks the operation of sympathy (G.H. Sabine [1906]: “Hume’s Contribution to the Historical Method”, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 15, 38). According to Hume, the object of sympathy is an agent in his specific environment – see for instance Hume’s description of the process a reader of history experiences: he “enters deeper into the concerns of the persons; represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships and enmities: He even goes so far as to form a notion of their features, and air, and person” (*Treatise*, 98). This description no doubt fits the historian’s experience while writing narratives. Even though I can hypothetically sympathise with everyone, to sympathise with someone, something must make me participate in his situation. Literally, I must take part in his life, and for this reason, I remain at the level of concrete particularities. Therefore, far from being too general and abstract, Humean history is the history of the individuals with whom the historian sympathises.

<sup>23</sup> For Hume, the moral approval of an action is ultimately directed to a character or a quality of mind since they are the only legitimate objects of moral valuation. But since a spectator is only acquainted with actions, he infers the agent’s character from his actions.

<sup>24</sup> It would be interesting to compare Hume’s theory with Davidson’s. Davidson argues that interpreting an event as an action involves rationalising it, i.e. interpreting it in the light of the agent’s beliefs and desires. But as I will argue in the third section, Davidson’s principle of charity has a smaller scope than Hume’s theory of interpretation.

<sup>25</sup> Jones describes Hume’s account of aesthetic understanding in similar terms. See Jones (1999): 260-sq.

<sup>26</sup> J.Y.T. Greig [1931]: *David Hume* (London: Jonathan Cape), 268.

<sup>27</sup> By ‘rationality’, I mean that what people do makes sense for them. In this sense, I believe Hume’s concept of rationality exhibits a wider scope than its contemporary versions for it includes emotions, attitudes, passions and sentiments.

<sup>28</sup> *The History of England*, vol. V, chapter LII, 240. Cf. also “The world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity. We have not as yet had experience of three thousand years; so that not only the art of reasoning is still defective in this science, as in all others, but we even want sufficient materials upon which we can reason” (*Of Civil Liberty*, 51). Hence, Hume is too aware of both his historically contingent condition and the youth of humanity to make such a trivial mistake.

<sup>29</sup> William Robertson [1769]: *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (London), II.67.

<sup>30</sup> The connection I suggest between Hume and the principle of charity was first inspired by the following passage of Hume’s *History of England*: “Sir George Ratcliffe, the earl’s intimate friend and confidant, was

---

accused of high treason, sent for from Ireland, and committed to close custody. As no charge ever appeared or was prosecuted against him, *it is impossible to give a more charitable interpretation of this measure*, than that the commons thereby intended to deprive Strafford, in his present distress, of the assistance of his best friend” (*The History of England*, vol. V, chapter LIV, 310-311 ; my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> A similar remark can be found in the writings of Adam Smith *à propos* the appropriateness of certain manners for a nation : “In general the style of manners which takes place in any nation may commonly upon the whole be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation. Hardiness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage; sensibility to those of one who lives in a very civilised society” (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, V.2.13, 209).

<sup>32</sup> *A Dialogue*, 334-335.

<sup>33</sup> *Enquiry*, 330.

<sup>34</sup> Our interpretation deliberately leaves out an issue that still needs to be tackled. Our argument seems to entail that Hume’s historical method implicitly contains a twofold theory of historical explanation. For instance, Hume writes: “What were the *reasons*, which engaged the king to admit such strange articles of peace, it is vain to enquire: For there scarcely could be any. The *causes* of that event may admit of a more easy explication” (*History of England*, vol. V, chapter LIII, 267). Thus, I have highlighted two distinct models of explanation: the ‘covering law model’, which traces back the *causes* of actions through moral and causal reasoning, and the ‘covering reason model’, which recovers the *reasons* behind actions by the means of sympathising with the agent. The former could be understood as the official Humean method (since it formulates general laws just as natural sciences), whereas the latter would be the genuine historical explanation (for it reaches the agent in his particular historical situation). Therefore, the remaining task is to coordinate these models within a theory of historical explanation.

<sup>35</sup> Agent’s reasons for acting are fundamentally aiming at some kind of good: “It appears, that there never was any quality recommended by any one [...] but on account of its being *useful*, or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others*” (*A Dialogue*, 335-336). Thus, when we trace back the causes of “Greek loves”, we reach “qualities esteemed in all nations and all ages” (*A Dialogue*, 334). For a detailed account, see D. W. Livingston [1984]: *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 187-sq.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Simon Blackburn for suggesting to me this expression.

<sup>37</sup> For Davidson has to accept that beliefs are true in order to understand their meaning – and we can only do this if we accept that what they say is largely true by our lights (cf. “Radical Interpretation” in D. Davidson [1984]: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)).

<sup>38</sup> For an extended analysis of this point, see S. Blackburn [2001]: “Is Hume the Historian the Human Historian?” (personal communication) and S.K. Wertz [1994]: “Collingwood’s Understanding of Hume”, *Hume Studies*, vol. XX, pp. 261-287.