HUME ON PRIDE, VANITY AND SOCIETY

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# ABSTRACT

Pride is a fundamental element in Hume’s description of human nature. An important part of the secondary literature on Hume is devoted to this passion. However, no one, as far as I am aware, takes seriously the fact that pride often appears in pairs with vanity. In Book 2 of the *Treatise*, pride is defined as the passion one feels when society recognizes his connection to a ‘cause’, composed by a ‘subject’ and a (positive) ‘quality’. Conversely, no definition of vanity is provided. Despite Hume’s fluctuating vocabulary, I hold that a conceptual difference between pride and vanity exists. To support this claim, I analyse the common features of these two passions, showing that both pride and vanity (a) are indirect passions, (b) are self-regarding passions, and (c) have the same structure. Supported by textual evidence, I then claim that vanity is a desire of reputation, a desire to feel pride, when pride is not (yet) in place, because its cause is only imaginary and not real. Nonetheless, I underscore that, at times, ‘vanity’ means simply pride and call for greater attention on this ongoing oscillation. In conclusion, I explore the implications of this account of vanity for social interactions in Hume’s philosophy, which illustrates its intrinsic ambivalence.

Keywords: David Hume, passions, pride, vanity, desire, esteem

# THE PROBLEM: VANITY OR PRIDE?

Hume’s *Treatise* contains an important discussion of the passions.1 Book 2 deals almost exclusively with this topic, a focus which was not unusual in eighteenth-century philosophical literature. A major part of the early modern French and British debate in moral philosophy was focused on feelings, passions and emotions. Hume taps into this vibrant environment, adopting, for instance, the previously existing distinction between calm and violent passions,2 the experimental methodology in the study of emotions,3 and the mechanism of self-justification.4 What is completely new in Hume’s account is his distinction between direct and indirect passions.5 Remarkably enough, Hume’s discussion in Book 2 begins with an analysis of the complex intentionality of the latter. After a brief section devoted to the *Division of the Subject*, Hume dives into the first couple of passions: pride and humility. They compose a couple because, even though they are ‘directly contrary in their effects’ (T 2.1.5.9) they possess the same threefold structure.

First of all, they have an object, which Hume identifies with the self: ‘When self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for pride or humility’ (T 2.1.2.2). However, this element is not sufficient to explain the opposition between pride and humility: ‘tho’ that connected succession of perceptions, which we call self, be always the object of these two passions, ’tis impossible it can be their cause, or be sufficient alone to excite them’ (T 2.1.2.3). Alongside the object, Hume introduces a further element in his explanation: the cause. ‘We must, therefore, make a distinction betwixt the cause and the object of these passions; betwixt that idea, which excites them, and that to which they direct their view, when excited’. It is in order to understand the nature of pride and humility that we have to explore their ‘cause or productive principle’ (T 2.1.2.4). Because of the ‘vast variety’ (T 2.1.2.5) of possible causes of pride and humility, ‘it appears necessary we shou’d make a new distinction in the causes of the passion, betwixt that quality, which operates, and the subject, on which it is plac’d’ (T 2.1.2.6). In the end, three main foundational components in the structure of pride and humility have emerged: an object, a subject, and (at least) one of its qualities.

At this point, Hume tries to clarify this explanation through an example. Let us take a man and his beautiful house. The object of pride will be his self, the cause will be composed of the house (the subject) and its beauty (the quality) from which pride arises.

A man, for instance, is vain of a beautiful house, which belongs to him . . . Here the object of the passion is himself, and the cause is the beautiful house: Which cause again is subdivided into two parts, *viz.* the quality, which operates upon the passion, and the subject, in which the quality inheres. The quality is the beauty, and the subject is the house, consider’d as his property or contrivance. (T 2.1.2.6)

Oddly enough, Hume presents this example adopting the term ‘vain’ instead of ‘proud’. This is just the beginning of a long series of switches between these two terms, which are sometimes put near each other by Hume, other times used interchangeably as if they were synonyms. This is never justified in the text and becomes more and more frequent in the following discussion of the passions, where Hume investigates the nature of pride labelling it sometimes as ‘vanity’.

A significant number of articles and books are devoted to Hume’s theory of passions. No one, as far as I am aware, takes seriously the question of whether vanity is conceptually different from pride.6 In some cases, pride and vanity are simply treated as if they were the same passion. In others, they are kept distinct according to a common sense differentiation, where pride is a good emotion and vanity is a negative one, which is not supported by any textual evidence, at least in the *Treatise*.

A striking example of the former conflationist tendency is in Mikko Tolonen’s *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of Civil Society* (2013), a book entirely devoted to Hume, Mandeville and the selfish passions. The author does not provide any clear distinction between pride and vanity. They are mostly assumed to be the same thing. Such a tacit assumption also runs through some milestones of Hume scholarship such as Annette Baier’s *A Progress of Sentiments* (1991), which refers to these two passions as if they were a single, unique emotion (‘vanity or pride in itself is not a problem’, 222).

Among the interpreters who incline towards the second mistake, namely, the establishment of a common sense distinction between a positive pride and a negative vanity, it has been argued that ‘there are . . . limits to Hume’s subversive reversal of the moral status of pride and humility: self-esteem may be laudable, but vanity is not’ (O’Brien 2012: 298). However, there is no textual evidence in the *Treatise* to uphold this distinction, at least in the strong form that O’Brien seems to suggest. It is undeniable that Hume makes normative claims about pride, writing for instance: ‘An excessive pride or over-weaning conceit of ourselves is always esteem’d vicious, and is universally hated’ (T 3.3.2.1). However, Hume is here condemning a violent degree of pride (see Immerwahr 1992), and not vanity, which is thought of as a distinct passion. Indeed, Hume goes so far as to claim that ‘vanity is rather to be esteem’d a social passion, and a bond of union among men’ (T 3.2.2.12).

Against the former views, I claim a conceptual distinction between pride and vanity is to be found in Hume’s works. Against the latter, I take it that this distinction is free from any moralistic trace, that Hume conceives all emotions as simple, natural, scientific facts of human moral anatomy, and that he claims they have to be observed and studied without being judged as moral or immoral.

Concerning inquiry into human nature, Hume famously contrasts the anatomist and the painter: ‘The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter; nor in his

accurate dissections and portraitures of the smaller parts of the human body, pretend to give his figures any graceful and engaging attitude or expression. There is even something hideous, or at least minute in the views of things, which he presents; and ’tis necessary the objects shou’d be set more at a distance, and be more cover’d up from sight, to make them engaging to the eye and imagination’ (T 3.3.6.6). Philosophers should first try to understand the passions before they judge them as good or evil. The deep comprehension of emotional phenomena will be useful to the construction of a moral theory, and the ‘anatomist . . . is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter’, to moral philosophers. ‘We must have an exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connexion, before we can design with any elegance or correctness’ (T 3.3.6.6). This should happen, however, only after one has given a naturalistic account of the passions, free from any religious or moral prejudice. This is true not only for pride or humility, love or hatred, but also for vanity.

Going back to the place where Hume drew his original distinction between direct and indirect passions, one reads, ‘Under the indirect passions I comprehend pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependants’ (T 2.1.1.4). In this general list, vanity and pride are distinct passions. Therefore, one may naturally ask whether under these two terms hold different meanings.7 Among the less developed passions Hume lists here, the presence of vanity is particularly striking, especially in the light of its closeness with pride, which becomes more and more explicit as Book 2 develops. If pride and vanity are so closely associated, and often one has the impression that Hume is just conflating the two terms, why does he list them separately? To answer this question, I shall begin by analysing what is certainly common to vanity and pride. Clarifying their common features, I will try to understand whether they are two autonomous emotions or, on the contrary, if Hume completely conflates the terms using two different words for rhetorical reasons such as to avoid repetition and embellish his style.

# POINTS OF INTERSECTION

First, both pride and vanity are indirect passions. This appears clearly from the quotation above (T 2.1.1.4). Hume explicitly comprehends vanity, as well as pride, under the group of indirect passions, namely the passions which ‘proceed [from good or evil], but by the conjunction of other qualities’ (T 2.1.1.4). This similarity is clear-cut and needs no further explanation. However, before turning to a second point of intersection, it is worth underlining a distinctive feature of indirect passions, which has not been sufficiently treated in Hume scholarship: ‘pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity’ always have to involve at least a plurality of selves. In other words, indirect

passions cannot emerge outside the social context. Robert S. Henderson remarked that an ‘idea of self is a necessary component of the indirect passions pride and humility and an idea of other selves is likewise essential for experience of love and hatred’ (1990: 42). Yet if we look closer to the text, it emerges that also in the case of pride one single self – mine – is not enough. It is impossible for an individual to feel pride or vanity without any form of society.

In T 2.1.6 Hume lists five limitations, or necessary conditions, for pride to arise. The third limitation is particularly interesting:

The third limitation is, that the pleasant or painful object be very discernible and obvious, and that *not only to ourselves, but to others also* ... We fancy ourselves more happy, as well as more virtuous or beautiful, when we appear so to others; but are still more ostentacious of our virtues than of our pleasures. (T 2.1.6.5)

If indirect passions need a new element to be roused, namely, the presence of others, vanity, as well as pride, needs it. One would be able to feel fear of a wild animal or the joy of a good hunt even if she were the only person on the Earth, but what about envy, love, pride?8 All indirect passions need a reference to other selves: they are not just complex nor reflexive, they are social passions. Both vanity and pride are indirect passions and, therefore, have important connections to society. I further develop this point in the last section of my paper.

Second, both pride and vanity are self-regarding passions. Having remarked that Hume often interchanges the two terms, pride and vanity, how can one know when he is actually talking about vanity? Here my strategy consists in finding the excerpts in which pride and vanity are named together. In these, one has good reasons to think that – even if they appear to be conceptually distinct – they share some important features. If not, Hume would not have listed them in pairs so frequently. These excerpts reveal, I believe, a close proximity between pride and vanity:

Genius and learning are pleasant and magnificent objects, and by both these circumstances are adapted to *pride and vanity.* (T 2.2.10.7)

Every thing belonging to a vain man is the best that is any where to be found. His houses, equipage, furniture, cloaths, horses, hounds, excel all others in his conceit; and ’tis easy to observe, that from the least advantage in any of these, he draws a new subject of *pride and vanity*. (T 2.1.10.2)

We are seduc’d into a good opinion of ourselves, and of all objects, that belong to us. They appear in a stronger light; are more agreeable; and consequently fitter subjects of *pride and vanity*, than any other. (T 2.2.4.8)

These examples are just a few, but they are enough to show that, if Hume is thinking about pride and vanity as two distinct emotions, then they seem to play a similar role and can be found in similar situations. Vanity and pride are strictly connected.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Hume assumes we share our use of these terms, and appeals to our phenomenological intuition of the ‘impressions of reflection’. Pride and vanity, likewise ‘any of the passions’ are ‘simple and uniform impressions, ’tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them’ (T 2.1.2.1). These passions are introduced not through phenomenological descriptions nor through definitions (according to Hume this is ‘impossible’), but rather through reference to everyday experiences and the contextual situations in which they emerge.9 According to Hume’s avowal, our prima facie idea seems to provide a satisfactory understanding of vanity. From its usage, we can affirm that our idea of it is the idea of a self-regarding passion, namely, a passion which has the self as its object. Therefore, the distinction between pride and vanity (if any) is not based on a difference of object: both these passions refer to one’s self. This could appear to lead to a problem, since it may be pointed out that vanity has the self as its object in a very different way than pride does. I will come back to this problem in a moment, when I take a closer look at what makes vanity and pride distinct from one another.

Third, both pride and vanity have the same structure. I have redrawn Hume’s description of the structure of pride above. Vanity is never analysed with the same systematic regard in any of Hume’s works. Nevertheless, some hints suggest that vanity shares with pride the same framework. Vanity, as much as pride, arises from a double relation of impressions and ideas:

’Twill now be easy to draw this whole reasoning to a point, and to prove, that when riches produce any pride or vanity in their possessors, as they never fail to do, ’tis only *by means of a double relation of impressions and ideas*. (T 2.1.10.10)

In addition to this, vanity seems to require a subject connected to the self, who actually feels the passion:

Every thing belonging to a vain man is the best that is any where to be found. His houses, equipage, furniture, cloaths, horses, hounds, excel all others in his conceit; and ’tis easy to observe, that from the least advantage in any of these, he draws *a new subject of pride and vanity*. (T 2.1.10.2)

We may observe, that no person is ever prais’d by another for any quality, which wou’d not, if real, produce, of itself, a pride in the person possest of it.

The elogiums either turn upon his power, or riches, or family, or virtue; all of which *are subjects of vanity*, that we have already explain’d and accounted for. (T 2.1.11.9)

The only missing pillar to build the same architecture as that of pride is the positive qualities, which compose the cause of pride when they are attached to a subject. Upon a close look, this element is also present in Hume’s text.

We can never have a vanity of resembling in trifles any person, unless he be possess’d of very shining qualities, which give us a respect and veneration for him. *These qualities*, then, are, properly speaking, *the causes of our vanity*, by means of their *relation to ourselves*. (T 2.1.9.3)

In summary, if vanity is distinct from pride, it also seems to be composed by an object (self) and a cause (subject + quality). Put together, vanity will appear to be an (1) indirect, (2) self-regarding passion, (3) with the same structure as pride.

# ANY ROOM FOR VANITY?

So far, I have detailed the similarities between vanity and pride in Hume’s account. I have done so because even in the (very few) existing essays on this topic, vanity and pride are seen as ‘go[ing] together and [being] unlikely to occur without each other’ (Reed 2012: 599). Yet the significant points of overlap detailed above do not entail their identity. Vanity and pride emerge from the same causes and refer to the same type of objects, but one can still legitimately ask: does this mean that they are the same passion? Is there any room for vanity, or is it just a synonym introduced to avoid unpleasant repetitions? A few lines from the section ‘Of the object and causes of love and hatred’ (T 2.2.1) are helpful in formulating an answer to these questions. Take the following key extract:

Now ’tis evident, that the very same qualities and circumstances, which are the causes of pride or self-esteem, are also the causes of *vanity or the desire of reputation* (T 2.2.1.9)

These few lines are illuminating because they state clearly (i) that (at least in some cases) pride is not vanity, (ii) that pride can be paraphrased as ‘self-esteem’, and

(iii) that vanity can be paraphrased as ‘desire of reputation’. This sentence seems to confirm to the hypothesis that pride and vanity, despite the foggy use of the terms, are (at least sometimes) conceptually distinct. But the salient point here is that vanity is described as a desire.

One could remark that Hume also refers to vanity as a ‘secondary satisfaction’ (T 2.2.5.21), arguing that ‘pride is the feeling of pleasure or satisfaction one takes from *original* causes whereas vanity is the feeling of pleasure one takes in the *secondary* causes like fame, praise, esteem, or favorable reputation’ (Reed 2012: 599). In spite of Hume’s usage of the term ‘vanity’ here, I consider this case as merely one of the many terminological ambiguities in Book 2 of the *Treatise*, not Hume’s outright account of this passion. If we consider vanity as a ‘secondary satisfaction’, as Reed proposes to do, one loses both its orectic nature and its motivational force.10 Only if we recognize Hume’s account of vanity as a desire can we make sense of some passages in which vanity is associated with the verbs ‘flatter’ or ‘satisfy’ like the following:11

Nothing *flatters our vanity* more than the talent of pleasing by our wit (T 2.1.7.7)

As we are proud of riches in ourselves, so *to satisfy our vanity* we desire that every one, who has any connexion with us, shou’d likewise be possest of them (T 2.1.9.10)

For instance, when a person lies, she could be doing so in order to appear more worthy of pride. In this sense, she acts upon vanity: she desires to be esteemed and to feel pride despite lacking a proper grounding for the appreciation she wants to have.

Hence the origin of vulgar lying; where men without any interest, and merely out of vanity, heap up a number of extraordinary events, which are either the fictions of their brain, or if true, have at least no connexion with themselves. Their fruitful invention supplies them with a variety of adventures; and where that talent is wanting, they appropriate such as belong to others, *in order to satisfy their vanity*. (T 2.1.8.6)

Conversely, pride in itself is never intrinsically associated with a desire. Indeed, ‘pride and humility are pure emotions in the soul, *unattended with any desire*, and not immediately exciting us to action’ (T 2.2.6.3). In the light of this fundamental difference between pride and vanity, it is therefore worth remarking that in spite of being listed among indirect passions, the latter is a particular form of desire.

This is noteworthy because some commentators have taken Hume’s statement about pride and humility to be about the indirect passions generally. On the contrary, as recently argued by Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, ‘Some indirect passions are desires, even though Hume has said that desire is a direct passion’ (2018: 25). In line with a general tendency to conflate vanity and pride, Radcliffe devotes her

attention to pity, malice, anger, and benevolence, but never considers vanity as a desire of esteem, independent from pride. Nonetheless, the evidence she brings in favor of the idea that indirect passions can serve as motives offers a wider framework in which to place my reconstruction of Hume’s neglected account of vanity.

This passion is not a self-satisfaction or self-esteem as pride appears to be. Vanity is a desire seeking satisfaction, and, in particular, it is a desire of (good) reputation. Since ‘a good or a bad reputation is . . . itself a source of pride or humility’ (McIntyre 1989: 552; see T 2.2.5.21), vanity ultimately appears to be a desire of pride.12

Before going on, it is now the moment to address the puzzlement one could express noticing that vanity and pride seem to have the self as object in very different ways. Vanity, I have claimed, is a desire for pride or esteem. This pride being the object of desire does not (yet) belong to us. It is imaginary. As Pauline Chazan has shown, we have good reasons to think that for Hume ‘pride and the idea of the self come into being simultaneously’ (1992: 46). This seems to imply that it is impossible for the self to be the object of vanity, since this would be the same as saying that the idea of the self may exist before pride. And yet, this problem is easily solved if one reflects on the fact that vanity is not a desire of a simple future pleasure. The simple desire of future happiness is not vanity. Vanity implies that one has a different self- representation. When I have a desire for pride, and, say, I work hard to become a successful individual in the philosophical community, this desire is accompanied by a new self-representation in my mind. Above we have seen that vanity has an imaginary cause. By the same token, we also have to accept that it has an imaginary self as object. A self which is not yet my self, but I hope to become that self in the future. In this sense, vanity appears to be a powerful engine for self-improvement.

One problem with this view is that this switch from a desire of esteem to a desire of pride may seem unjustifiable. Pride and esteem are not synonymous: pride is something I feel; esteem is something paid to me by others. But, after all, why does one want to be esteemed if not because one wants to feel that pleasant passion Hume calls ‘pride’? The kind of pride we feel when we are paid esteem or have a good reputation is only one kind of pride. Many other sources of pride seem not to imply any need for esteem. That my house is beautiful is a fact, one could say. I do not need anyone else’s esteem to feel proud of it. Hume’s text, however, goes in a different direction: in order to be proud of something ‘the pleasant or painful object [needs to] be very discernible and obvious, and that not only to ourselves, but to others also’ (T 2.1.6.6). This claim means that for Hume one cannot feel pride without being esteemed (or at least believing oneself esteemed). As I claimed above, pride is a social passion, and every attempt to reduce it to objective possession independent of social relationships is doomed to

fail. For this reason, I think vanity can be defined not only as a desire for esteem, but also for pride.13

However, the existence of a conceptual distinction between pride and vanity in the *Treatise* should not mislead. Assuming the presence in Hume’s text of a systematic correspondence between the term ‘vanity’ and a ‘desire of reputation’ would be no less mistaken than ignoring any difference between these two passions. On more than one occasion, Hume writes ‘vanity’ having ‘pride’ in mind. There are at least two ways to unmask such a displacement of meaning: through (a) opposition and (b) rhetorical variation. I will give a couple of examples for each of them.

Regarding (a) opposition, Hume uses the term ‘vanity’ in opposition to humility, shame or mortification. Humility is by definition the opposite of pride (see T 2.1.2). As a consequence, in the case of opposition, under the word ‘vanity’ is to be found a form of ‘self-esteem’, and not a ‘desire of reputation’. In the following excerpts, Hume writes ‘vanity’, but, I believe, there is no doubt he is meaning ‘pride’:

’Tis here worth observing, that the *vanity of power*, or *shame of slavery*, are much augmented by the consideration of the persons, over whom we exercise our authority, or who exercise it over us. (T 2.1.10.12)

Nothing causes greater vanity than any shining quality in our relations; as nothing mortifies us more than their vice or infamy. (T 2.2.2.13)

Regarding (b) rhetorical variation, consider the cases in which Hume uses ‘vanity’ to refer to same passion that he is analysing in the very same sentence under the name of pride. I take this use of the term ‘vanity’ as a way to embellish his style and avoid repetitions. See the following example:

Men sometimes boast of a great entertainment, at which they have only been present; and by so small a relation convert their pleasure into pride: But however, this must in general be own’d, that joy arises from a more inconsiderable relation than *vanity*, and that many things, which are too foreign to produce pride, are yet able to give us a delight and pleasure . . . A relation is requisite to joy, in order to approach the object to us, and make it give us any satisfaction. But beside this, which is common to both passions [joy and pride], ’tis requisite to pride, in order to produce a transition from one passion [joy] to another [pride], and convert the satisfaction [that is, joy] into *vanity* [that is, pride]. (T 2.1.6.2)

In this excerpt, Hume uses the term ‘vanity’, but he never intends to talk about a ‘desire of reputation’. Trying to substitute the occurrences of ‘vanity’ with ‘pride’

reveals a clue to the reason why Hume seems to conflate the terms: if he had used a single word, ‘pride’, the text would sound repetitive and monotonous. This would have been unacceptable to a man who spent ‘almost all [his] life . . . in literary pursuits and occupations’ (1777/1932: 1).

Both in (a) and (b) it should be clear that the concept of pride as defined in T 2.1.1–2 hides under the facade of the word ‘vanity’. In these cases, vanity is not a ‘desire of reputation’. Here, vanity is simply pride.

# VANITY, OR THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL RECOGNITION

If my reconstruction is correct, sometimes vanity and pride mean exactly the same thing; sometimes they do not. In the former case, vanity is a synonym of pride.14 In the latter, vanity is to be read as ‘desire for reputation’. In this case, vanity has the same structure of pride (object-cause). However, its cause is not necessarily tied to reality, but rather to imagination. One can feel vanity because one has a desire for reputation, one wants to feel proud, but the cause of pride is not (yet) real. In other words, vanity uses an imaginary cause to push one to action.

The dynamics underlining such mechanism can be seen most clearly when Hume analyses the influence of the imagination on the passions. He affirms: ‘’Tis remarkable, that the imagination and affections have a close union together, and that nothing, which affects the former, can be entirely indifferent to the latter’ (T 2.3.6.1). Among the various ways an idea can acquire vivacity one can also find reputation. Hume says, ‘The bare opinion of another, especially when enforc’d with passion, will cause an idea of good or evil to have an influence upon us, which wou’d otherwise have been entirely neglected’ (T 2.3.6.8). Vanity pushes one towards the acquisition of possessions or a good reputation. Being a desire of pride and esteem, this passion provides the agent with a strong impulse to acquire what she presently lacks.

Vanity is therefore essential to understand how one comes to feel pride over time. Hume’s discussion in part 1 of Book 2 is limited to how and why people feel pride in the moment. By appealing to the double relation of impressions and ideas, Hume justifies the emergence of a pleasant passion distinct from joy. He calls that passion ‘pride’. And yet, Hume does not explicitly say how one comes to develop pride over time. I think vanity, defined as a desire of esteem and of pride, is an essential pillar for understanding this point. Vanity motivates one to pursue things that would be sources of pride, something one wants but does not yet have: a good (or better) reputation and the esteem of others. In contemporary terms, we would say that if the process of social recognition is already in place one will feel pride; if it is not, one will feel vanity. Vanity is essentially generated by a desire of recognition, namely, the intersubjective acknowledgement of one’s status.15

At this point, one could be confused. Vanity brings one to ‘vulgar lying’, but it also seems to play a propulsive role in social interactions. As long as a philosopher is enquiring into the nature of passions per se, he or she has to embrace the anatomist’s method, but when it comes to ethics, passions can acquire a moral meaning.16 Therefore, at this point, one could legitimately ask: is vanity a positive emotion or harmful to oneself and to society? I think that the *Treatise* offers a varied and multifaceted account of this passion, revealing its inherent ambivalence.

On the one hand, Hume recognizes that vanity can cause us to act against each other and to value social appearance more than real status. This is true not only in the case of one’s lying in order to augment one’s reputation beyond the boundaries of reality, but also in a series of other situations. ‘Men sometimes boast of a great entertainment, at which they have only been present; and by so small a relation convert their pleasure into pride’, Hume says in T 2.1.6.2. In this example, excessive vanity turns one’s joy for being invited to a feast into a deceitful form of pride, an excessive self-applause which becomes useless for the person who feels it and ridiculous to the society around them. In other situations, ‘to satisfy our vanity we desire that every one, who has any connexion with us, shou’d likewise be possest of [riches], and are asham’d of any one, that is mean or poor, among our friends and relations’ (T 2.1.9.10). The desire of reputation brings one to break some of one’s social relations, refusing the company of poorer friends. In these cases, vanity can fuel conflicts and dissension, with detrimental effects on social stability.

Nonetheless, it is equally true that vanity has an essential importance in shaping positive social situations: it brings people together. Vanity can be the glue of civil society. ‘Nothing flatters our vanity more than the talent of pleasing by our wit, good humour, or any other accomplishment; and nothing gives us a more sensible mortification than a disappointment in any attempt of that nature’ (T 2.1.7.7). Far from being harmful, vanity also prompts the desire to please, to be appreciated and recognized by peers. It is a powerful engine to socialization, ‘a bond of union among men’ (T 3.2.2.12).

In summary, vanity can manifest itself in two different forms. On the one hand, it can be a desire of due pride. On the other, it could bring a relentless, devouring desire of excessive self-applause. In the former sense, vanity is much closer to pride. In the latter, it appears to be similar to another disrupting passion: avidity. When we are moved by this greedy passion, the desire ‘of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, [becomes] insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society’ (T 3.2.2.12). Avidity brings one to the unlimited desire of possession. Similarly, vanity could lead to an unrestricted search for self-applause. In its negative form, vanity appears to be a sort of avidity for status and symbolic goods.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS: IRONING OUT ONE’S VANITY

In the first section of this paper, I retraced Hume’s description of the structure of pride. Pride has an object and a cause. Take again Hume’s example of a man and his beautiful house. Pride exists only because of this relation between one’s self (the man) and a proper cause (his beautiful house). Putting it in terms of closeness to pride, vanity can function both as an engine to promote the search for an adequate cause of pride, but it can also degenerate into a desire of excessive pride, a fatuous greed for self-applause which has lost every tie to a real cause and to an achievable degree of self-improvement.

I am persuaded that Hume did realize this deep ambivalence in his account of vanity and its double-edged role in human society. This is the reason why he chose to modify his usage of the term ‘vanity’, making it unequivocally negative in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). In this later work, the ongoing oscillation to be found in the *Treatise* is completely eradicated. Hume does not hesitate to lash out at ‘the slight gratification of a frivolous vanity, [which] in one individual, frequently costs more than bread to many families’ (EPM 3.25). Vanity, as well as avarice, ambition, and self-love, is ‘excluded from

. . . the origin of morals’ (EPM 9.5). This is a remarkable change of perspective. Despite its ambivalence (often leading to ambiguity), in Hume’s first work vanity was still ‘to be esteem’d a social passion, and a bond of union among men’ (T 3.2.2.12). In the same vein, Hume’s essay ‘Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature’ [1741] stated that ‘vanity is . . . closely allied to virtue, and to love of the fame of laudable actions’ (1985: 86).

Some years later, recasting the *Treatise*,17 Hume ‘repented [his] Haste a hundred, and a hundred times’ (Hume 1777/1932: 158). Among other aspects, I think he regretted also the ambiguity of his treatment of vanity, ascribing it to the hasty decision to go ‘to the press too early’ moved by what in ‘My Own Life’ he does not hesitate to call ‘my ruling passion’: the ‘love of literary fame’.18 If his first work was ‘dead-born from the press’, that was in his eyes due also to the ambiguous and rough account of vanity it contained. Maybe as a twist of fate, or moved by the will to reproach his youthful desire for reputation, Hume came to write against vanity, once esteemed a bond of union between men, some of the fiercer lines to be found in his entire writings:

Wherein, then, consists VANITY, which is so justly regarded as a fault or imperfection? It seems to consist chiefly in such an intemperate display of our advantages, honours, and accomplishments; in such an importunate and open demand of praise and admiration, as is offensive to others . . . (EPM 8.11)

Here the term ‘vanity’ is cast as an excessive, intemperate, and negative emotion. More telling, it is a source of illusions. Hume writes, ‘Our predominant motive

or intention is, indeed, frequently concealed from ourselves, when it is mingled and confounded with other motives, which the mind, from vanity or self-conceit, is desirous of supposing more prevalent’ (EPM App.2.7). Because of vanity, we deceive ourselves and stop seeing the real motives for our actions. Vanity, in the *Enquiry*, becomes not only morally dangerous, but also epistemically detrimental.

This does not mean, however, that Hume is refusing the motivational drive of a desire of esteem. He is still persuaded that ‘nature must, by the internal frame and constitution of the mind, give an original propensity to fame’ (EPM App.2.12). In the *Enquiry,* Hume praises the ‘love of fame’, which ‘rules, with such uncontrouled authority, in all generous minds’ and is the ‘surest guardian of every virtue’ (EPM 9.10). He is crystal clear about the fact that a ‘desire of fame, reputation, or a character with others, is so far from being blameable’ and ‘that it seems inseparable from virtue, genius, capacity, and a generous or noble disposition’ (EPM 8.11). But Hume is not naming this emotion ‘vanity’ anymore. What changes in the *Second Enquiry* is not Hume’s account of a ‘desire for esteem’, but rather his usage of the term ‘vanity’, which acquires an undeniably negative connotation. His general view about the desire for pride and esteem, however, remain untouched in its ambivalence.19

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# NOTES

1 T David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*; EPM David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*.

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2 See Essary and Haskell (2018) for a detailed reconstruction of the history of this distinction from Latin authors such as Quintilian and Cicero to the late eighteenth- century debate.

3 See Taylor (2015), especially chapter 1.

4 On Hume’s debts to Malebranche concerning the mechanism of self-justification see Le Jallé (2012).

5 As remarked by McIntyre (2000: 78), ‘One feature of Hume’s theory of the passions that is distinctively original is the categorization of the passions into the direct and the indirect: neither this terminology nor any equivalent classification occurs in earlier or contemporary works on the passions’. On Hume’s taxonomy of the passions, its originality, and its debts to past authors see also Fieser (1992) and Immerwahr (1994).

6 The only two studies devoted to vanity are Schliesser (2003) and Reed (2012). Unfortunately, neither of these essays is fully engaged in an analysis of the terminological oscillation between pride and vanity. A recent addition is Margaret Watkins’ discussion in her *The Philosophical Progress of Hume’s Essays* (2019), chapter 5.

7 Reed (2012) has noticed the inconsistency in ‘how [Hume] uses the term “vanity”’ (598). However, he does not offer a systematic attempt to reconstruct Hume’s usage of this word and focuses instead on the more general role of vanity in Hume’s moral psychology.

8 One could say that a solitary woodcarver, a Robinson Crusoe figure, could fashion a beautiful sculpture out of oak, step back, admire his work, and feel pride. This seems an easy and plausible counter-example to Hume’s theory. However, Hume is not trying to affirm that the five limitations have to be always in place. The limitations are necessary conditions to develop (and not to actually feel) the emotion. One cannot develop the capability to feel pride without a society, but once one has acquired it, the five limitations will not have to be always in place in order for them to feel proud or humble. I am grateful to Dan O’Brien for a stimulating debate with me on this point.

9 On Hume’s two different approaches to the study of the passion see Elizabeth Radcliffe’s proposal to distinguish a ‘structural’ or ‘functional account’, and a ‘distinct phenomenal dimension . . . introspectively accessible’ (Radcliffe 2015: 574). For a different interpretation see Hsueh Qu (2012).

10 It is worth noting that Reed considers Hume’s account of vanity as also including a desire. He underlines that ‘Hume uses the term vanity, the love of fame, or the love of esteem, he is talking about *an agent’s pleasure in or desire for the favorable opinion of others as well as an agent’s pain in or desire to avoid their unfavorable opinion*’ (2012: 598). However, in the light of the discussion in sections 3 and 4 of this paper, I have good reasons to consider Hume’s vanity uniquely as a desire of recognition and to ascribe the connection between vanity and a secondary satisfaction to the fact – also noted by Reed – that Hume’s account ‘is not always consistent with how he uses the term “vanity”’ (2012: 598).

11 The plausibility of this explanation is further supported by two other points: (1) Hume uses the same expressions of desire, seek of satisfaction, and the like in other works as well (see, for instance, EPM 3.25 and Hume 2007: 2.20). (2) This explanation would make sense of the fact that there is not a counterpart that stands in relation to humility as vanity stands to pride. No one has a natural desire to feel humiliated; therefore, such a passion does not exist in Hume’s emotional vocabulary.

12 For a detailed account of how the desire of esteem and admiration can function as a morally driving force, see Besser-Jones (2010). In her essay, she articulates the motivational impulse of pride, which being one of the desiderata of men and women, (indirectly) leads them to action. Note, however, that Besser-Jones refers to a desire of pride without discussing vanity and, therefore, lacking an important part of Hume’s view.

13 I am thankful to Philip Reed for raising this objection and leading me to further reflect on this point.

14 It is worth noting that the opposite is never true. On no occasion does Hume seem to use the term pride to refer to a desire of esteem.

15 Axel Honneth (2012: 64) describes social recognition as the process through which ‘[s]ubjects mutually recognize each other as private autonomous beings who act for each other and thereby sustain their livelihood through the contribution their labour makes to society’.

16 This is part of what seems to be an internal tension in Hume’s writing. On the one hand, the passions are acknowledged as natural and amoral facts; on the other, however, Hume still seems to share a long standing prejudice about some so-called ‘negative emotions’. I discuss this matter more widely analysing the case of anger in my forthcoming article, ‘Where is the Fury? On Hume’s Peculiar Account of Anger and Resentment’ (2020).

17 For a close reading of the differences between Hume’s account of the passions in the

*Treatise* in comparison with the later works see Merivale (2009).

18 Eric Schliesser has explored in detail the role of vanity in Hume’s autobiography. Brilliantly reading some letters from Adam Smith’s correspondence, he shows that Hume recognizes ‘he is a vain man [and] all he hopes is that his vanity is not misplaced’ (2003: 334). However, Schliesser does not focus on the *Treatise*, and therefore never explores the terminological and conceptual oscillation between vanity and pride.

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