

# **Mental Faculties and Powers and the Foundations of Hume's Philosophy**

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## **1. Introduction: Faculty Psychology and Critic of "Faculties"**

Hume is famous for his critiques of attempts to make robust use of terms like "power" or "faculty" in a philosophical or scientific context. But at the same time Hume's philosophy is itself structured around the attribution to human beings of a variety of basic faculties or mental powers – such as reason or the understanding, the imagination, and the various powers involved in Hume's account of impressions of sensation and reflection. Indeed, this is so true that it has been said that Hume, "never hesitates to infer from the fact that the mind regularly does something of a particular recognizable kind that it has a power to do it and a faculty by which it does."<sup>1</sup> As this indicates, Hume continues to treat mental faculties as forming something close to the explanatory bedrock of his new "science of man".<sup>2</sup> Thus, by contemporary lights, the "science of man" remains an exercise in "faculty psychology".<sup>3</sup>

It remains to be seen whether Hume's own appeals to faculties fall within the scope of his critiques. But this tension at least raises the question of whether Hume is entitled to the uses of faculty concepts we find in his philosophy. To see why one might worry about such questions, it will be helpful to begin by considering Hume's criticisms of *other* philosophers' use of notions like "faculty" or "power". We can begin with Philo's criticism in the *Dialogues* of "the philosophy of the Peripatetics", where Hume writes:

It was usual with the *Peripatetics*, you know, *Cleanthes*, when the cause of any phenomenon was demanded, to have recourse to their *faculties* or *occult qualities*, and to say, for instance; that bread nourished by its nutritive faculty, and senna purged by its purgative: But it has been discovered, that this subterfuge was nothing but the disguise of ignorance; and that these philosophers, though less ingenuous, really said the same thing with the sceptics or the vulgar, who fairly confessed, that they knew not the cause of these phenomena. ... These are only more learned and elaborate ways of confessing our ignorance; nor has the one hypothesis any real advantage above the other, except in its greater conformity to vulgar prejudices. (D 4.12)

Here Philo echoes criticisms of the "Peripatetics" that would have been familiar to most of Hume's readers. But especially notable for our purposes is Hume's willingness to treat "faculties" and "occult qualities" in the same breath as two equally apt targets of Philo's criticisms of the Peripatetic philosophy. For this *suggests* a view on which any appeal to faculties in philosophy should be seen as an appeal to the sort of "occult qualities" that Philo here attacks. In other words, why are Hume's references to faculties like "reason" or "the

imagination” not themselves a “subterfuge”, which ultimately serves as only a “more learned and elaborate way of confessing [his own] ignorance”?

Of course, questions might be raised about whether Hume himself would endorse everything Philo says in the *Dialogues*. But Hume expresses similar claims elsewhere. For example, consider the following from the *Treatise*:

But as nature seems to have observed a kind of justice and compensation in every thing, she has not neglected philosophers more than the rest of the creation; but has reserved them a consolation amid all their disappointments and afflictions. This consolation principally consists in their invention of the words: faculty and occult quality. For it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we would express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recal the idea at pleasure; so it naturally happens, that after the frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent, and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection. The resemblance of their appearance deceives the mind, as is usual, and makes us imagine a thorough resemblance and conformity. By this means these philosophers set themselves at ease, and arrive at last, by an illusion, at the same indifference, which the people attain by their stupidity, and true philosophers by their moderate scepticism. They need only say, that any phenomenon, which puzzles them, arises from a faculty or an occult quality, and there is an end of all dispute and enquiry upon the matter. (T 1.4.3.10, my emphasis)

Here Hume claims that the “false philosophy of the ancients” achieves by the “invention of words” like “faculty” or “occult quality” the same “indifference” produced more honestly by the “true philosophy” – that is, his moderate or mitigated skepticism. Notably, Hume again treats both “faculties” and “occult qualities” as deserving the same basic treatment, which, once again, raises the question of whether Hume’s own philosophy isn’t ultimately trafficking in exactly the techniques of the “false philosophy” he condemns? Why, that is, are Hume’s use of terms like “reason” or “the imagination” not ultimately themselves “entirely incomprehensible” in the same way as the use the “Peripatetics” make of such concepts? (T 1.4.3.8)

These questions are closely related to the tension between Hume’s apparent skepticism concerning our cognitive faculties and his positive use of those faculties in constructing his naturalistic “science of man”. Just as is true in that case, many readers of Hume might wonder how worried Hume *really* should be by this? After all, even if Hume does make use of faculty concepts throughout the “science of man”, perhaps his use of these concepts is importantly different from the use of them that he condemns in the “Peripatetics”? Perhaps, that is, Hume’s faculties are not really an instance of “faculties and occult qualities” in the sense he condemns in these passages?

## **2. Possible Complaints about “Faculties and Occult Qualities”**

To answer this, we need to consider whether *any* appeal to “faculties” in philosophy is an apt target of these criticisms, or whether it is only a particular sort of “robust” appeal to “faculties”

that Hume finds problematic. To do this, we need to begin by getting clear about just what is problematic for Hume about the appeals the “Peripatetics” make to “faculties” and “occult qualities” in their philosophy. Unfortunately, this is far from a trivial task. For there are many related, but distinct, worries in play in the early modern debate about “faculties and occult qualities”.<sup>4</sup> All these can be seen as dimensions of the same basic worry – namely, that these entities are “occult” in the sense of being “hidden” from us in ways that makes appealing to them problematic in a scientific or philosophical context. But the sense of “hiddenness” varies greatly and includes both epistemological and metaphysical issues.

A first version of this thought – which is natural in the context of Hume’s commitment to the methods of the “experimental philosophy” – is the worry that positing “faculties or occult qualities” is problematic because their existence is not well-supported by empirical data or experience:

**Empirical Data:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because their existence is not well-supported by empirical data or experience.

This principle was often cited by early modern philosophers and scientists when defending themselves against the charge that they were trafficking in “occult qualities”. For example, this is just the response that Cotes gives to the charge that gravity is an occult quality in his Preface to the second edition of Newton’s *Principia*:

Some I know disapprove this conclusion, and mutter something about occult qualities.

They continually are cavilling with us, that gravity is an occult property; and occult causes are to be quite banished from philosophy. But to this the answer is easy; that those

are indeed occult causes whose existence is occult; and imagined but not proved; but not those whose real existence is clearly demonstrated by observations. Therefore gravity can by no means be called an occult cause of the celestial motions; because it is plain from the phenomena that such a virtue does really exist. Those rather have recourse to occult causes; who set imaginary vortices, of a matter entirely fictitious, and imperceptible by our senses, to direct those motions. (Newton 1729, xxvii)

But *this* is plainly *not* a worry Hume would have had about his own appeals to faculties like the imagination or reason. After all, Hume takes the existence of those faculties to be attested to by repeated experiments. Indeed, much of the argument of his philosophical works is dedicated to show just this. So, if *this* is what is worrisome about “faculties and occult qualities”, it seems obvious how Hume would respond.

Something similar is true of a related set of worries about “occult qualities”. These involve the idea that faculty concepts are often highly local and so contrary to methodological principles of simplicity and parsimony. As a result, one might think, positing the existence of such faculties and qualities is not generally explanatorily fruitful in the manner it is supposed to be:

**Simplicity:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because their existence is contrary to principles of simplicity and parsimony.

**Explanatory:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because positing them is not explanatorily fruitful.

Once again, these principles plainly draw on factors that Hume takes seriously. For example, there is no doubt that good explanations are in some way responsive to considerations of simplicity for Hume.<sup>6</sup> And Hume is plainly interested in developing good explanations in the science of man. Indeed, Hume levels complaints very much like these against other philosophers – and not just philosophers of a “Peripatetic bent”. For example, something like this is at work in Hume’s complaint against Hutcheson’s account of the moral sense in the *Treatise*:<sup>7</sup>

Such a method of proceeding is not conformable to the usual maxims, by which nature is conducted, where a few principles produce all that variety we observe in the universe, and every thing is carryed on in the easiest and most simple manner. It is necessary, therefore, to abridge these primary impulses, and find some more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded. (T 3.1.2.6)

But once again, Hume would clearly feel confident that his own appeals to the faculties like the imagination meet these criteria. For, as this passage itself indicates, he takes his own system of “faculty psychology” to do better by these lights than those of his opponents. Partially for this reason, Hume takes his own use of faculty concepts to be explanatorily fruitful in the context of the science of man in ways the faculties of other moral philosophers are not. So, none of these worries would be likely to trouble Hume.

The same is true of the idea that “faculties and occult qualities” are problematic because their inner workings or principles are unknown to us:

**Unknown:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because the inner workings / principles of such qualities are unknown.

After all, Hume seems to take it for granted that the *ultimate explanations* of many phenomena will be obscure to us. Indeed, this is so true for him that it applies to even the most successful examples of natural science Hume can point to. For example, in the *History*, Hume notably describes Newton’s accomplishments as follows:<sup>8</sup>

... While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he shewed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity, in which they ever did and ever will remain. (HE 71.99)

Thus, as Hume says in the first *Enquiry*, even “the most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance a little longer”. (EU 4.12) From such passages, it seems clear that Hume would not reject a causal explanation simply because the *ultimate* explanation of those causes and their operations are unknown to us. Indeed, these passages suggest that Hume would not reject a causal explanation *even if* the ultimate explanation of those causes and their operations will always remain unknown to us. For here he suggests that even Newton’s triumphs rest on certain “ultimate secrets” in nature that will forever remain “obscure”. Thus, these passages suggest not only that Hume would reject Unknown, but also that he would reject the following related, but weaker principle:

**Unknowable:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because the inner workings / principles of such qualities are not knowable.



In making these points, Hume seems to be echoing a response to the charge that Newtonian gravitation is an “occult quality” that Cotes presents in his *Preface to the Principia*:

But shall gravity be therefore called an occult cause, and thrown out of philosophy, because the cause of gravity is occult and not yet discovered? Those who affirm this, should be careful not to fall into an absurdity that may overturn the foundations of all philosophy. For causes use to proceed in a continued chain from those that are more compounded to those that are more simple; when we are arrived at the most simple cause we can go no farther. Therefore no mechanical account or explanation of the most simple cause is to be expected or given; for if it could be given, the cause were not the most simple. These most simple causes will you then call occult, and reject them? Then you must reject those that immediately depend upon them, and those which depend upon these last, till philosophy is quite cleared and disencumbered of all causes. (Newton 1729, xxvii–xxviii)

Here Cotes presents a simple regress argument against the idea that all causes should themselves be explicable. This argument has many issues, but what matters here is its conclusion, which (as we’ve just seen) Hume also accepts. Given this, both Cotes and Hume would reject, not only Unknown and Unknowable, but also the following account of what makes “faculties and occult qualities” problematic:

**Inexplicable:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because they are necessarily inexplicable – for example, no further explanation of their operations can be given in mechanical terms.<sup>9</sup>

In their respective characterizations of Newton's accomplishments, Hume and Cotes agree that a principle like this might very well call into question Newtonian physics. But they also agree that such a principle should be rejected.

Thus, both Cotes and Hume share the view that Inexplicable places an overly demanding constraint on scientific theorizing. But interestingly, Cotes and Hume seem to reject this principle for somewhat different reasons. Cotes rejects it because he takes it as obvious that our mechanical explanations will bottom out in certain basic causes – which will not themselves be explicable in mechanical terms. Thus, for Cotes, we should reject such a principle because any feasible version of the “mechanical philosophy” must in the end appeal to basic causes that cannot themselves be understood in mechanical terms. For Hume, on the other hand, Newton is best understood, not as a triumphant exemplar of the mechanical philosophy, but as demonstrating the limitations of this philosophy – thereby restoring the “ultimate secrets” of nature to “obscurity”. For Hume, then, we should reject Inexplicable not because it would render it impossible for us to know the “most simple causes” involved in the “mechanical philosophy”, but rather because we are never likely to grasp the “basic causes” or “ultimate secrets” in nature.

In keeping with his moderate skepticism, Hume's view of Newton seems to be that *this* ignorance of ultimate causes or explanations in the physical world is perfectly compatible with Newtonian physics being explanatorily powerful. Indeed, Hume is willing at times to go so far as to claim that “every explication, that human reason can give of the material world” seems to be attended with certain “contradictions, and absurdities”. (T App 10) But

he plainly does not take this to render natural scientific investigation into the material world pointless.

This last point is especially interesting in relation to Hume's famous "second thoughts" in the Appendix to the *Treatise*. The focus of those worries is Hume's account of the self (or our idea thereof). More precisely, Hume worries that, "having thus loosened all our particular perceptions", when he proceeds "to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together" in us he discovers his account to be "very defective". For, Hume says, he finds himself unable to "explain the principles, that unite" perceptions together against the background of two commitments of his philosophy: (i) "that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences" and (ii) "that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences". (T App.21) Just what exactly is worrying Hume in this passage is controversial.<sup>10</sup> But these worries lead Hume to the conclusion that his account of the unity of the mind rests on certain "principles of connexion" that are in some sense "incomprehensible" against the background of Hume's basic philosophical commitments.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, in stating these worries, Hume refers the reader back to his earlier optimism about the "science of man" in *Treatise* 1.4.5, where he had hoped that his "theory of the intellectual world" would be "free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world". Thus, the Appendix worries seem to show that Hume's science of man is no better off than "explications of the material world" like Newtonian physics. Once again, this would hardly show that the "science of man" should be rejected. Rather it would simply place Hume's theory of the "intellectual world" *on a par* with Newton's theory of the material one. But it

does show that defending *either* of these theories requires rejecting a principle like Inexplicable – since both would have been seen to rest on explanatory foundations that are themselves inexplicable on the theory’s own terms.

This explains why Hume does not generally reject the *Treatise*’s conclusions in response to the Appendix. But nonetheless, at this juncture, one might begin to worry that Hume’s complaints against the “Peripatetics” do draw blood against his own philosophy.<sup>12</sup> After all, in these passages, Hume seems to concede that considered as an account of these basic “principles of connexion”, his explanatory appeals to (say) the associative powers of the “imagination” are nothing but a “more learned and elaborate way of confessing his own ignorance” of the “principles” that connect distinct perceptions.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Hume is well-placed to insist that this is simply one dimension of his general moderate skepticism. But there is another version of principles like Inexplicable that might be more problematic for him. For suppose we take “faculties or occult qualities” in the problematic sense to be ones whose inner workings / principles are, not merely inexplicable in other terms, but *fundamentally mysterious* or *incomprehensible* to us:

**Mystery:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because their inner workings / principles are, not just unknowable, but also fundamentally mysterious or incomprehensible.

One version of this worry is especially natural with respect to the “the Peripatetics” – namely, the worry that the faculties of the Peripatetics are mysterious or incomprehensible insofar as they operate in accordance with forms of causation or “explanatory magic” that cannot be

captured in standard efficient causal terms. In particular, at least on the standard reading of his philosophy, it would be natural for Hume to think that the faculties of the Peripatetics are mysterious or incomprehensible insofar as their operations make an essential appeal to teleological forms of explanation:

**Teleological Mystery:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because their inner workings / principles are fundamentally mysterious or incomprehensible insofar they make essential appeal to teleological forms of explanation.

Once again, Hume plainly is at times concerned about appeals to teleology in a philosophical context. For example, see Hume’s famous letter to Hutcheson, where he writes:

I cannot agree to your sense of Natural. 'Tis founded on final Causes; which is a Consideration, that appears to me pretty uncertain & unphilosophical. For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or for the next? For himself or for his Maker? Your Definition of Natural depends upon solving these Questions, which are endless, & quite wide of my Purpose. (LET 13)

This shows the need to avoid appeals to final causes in the science of man is something that Hume was sensitive to, at least in certain contexts.<sup>14</sup> But there is a particular worry about positing such “intrinsically mysterious” teleological powers that is worth making explicit here, as we will return to it below. This is the idea that positing such powers or qualities is problematic in philosophy and science because doing so cuts off inquiry prematurely in ways that are fundamentally contrary to the experimental method:

**Contrary to Inquiry:** One should not posit “faculties and occult qualities” because positing them cuts off inquiry prematurely.

This, it is worth stressing, was Bacon’s primary complaint about such qualities, and is often cited as the real issue at stake in these debates.<sup>15</sup> For example, Pemberton focuses on it in his well-known defense of Newton from the charge that gravity is an “occult quality” in *A View of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy*:<sup>16</sup>

That something relating to them lies hid, the followers of this philosophy are ready to acknowledge, nay desire it should be carefully remarked, as pointing out proper subjects for future inquiry. But this is very different from the proceeding of the schoolmen in the causes called by them occult. For as their occult qualities were understood to operate in a manner occult, and not apprehended by us; so they were obtruded upon us for such original and essential properties in bodies, as made it vain to seek any farther cause; and a greater power was attributed to them, than any natural appearances authorized.”

(Pemberton and Glover 1728, 17)

There are similar elements at work in Hume’s critique of the “ancient philosophers” – as when Hume says that such philosophers “need only say, that any phenomenon, which puzzles them, arises from a faculty or an occult quality, and there is an end of all dispute and enquiry upon the matter.” (T 1.4.3.10) Nonetheless, as we have noted, Hume’s basis for making such complaints *about others* is complicated by his own moderate skepticism. For it is essential to Hume’s skepticism that we *should* indeed stop inquiring into the ultimate causes of things at a certain point. So while Hume does accept Contrary to Inquiry in some form, in making use of it to criticize the “Peripatetics”, his complaint cannot simply be that their use of such concepts puts

a stop to inquiry *at some point*. Rather, it must be that the use of such concepts cuts off inquiry *prematurely*. Thus, to make this complaint stick against the Peripatetics, Hume needs a standard that distinguishes the point at which it is *legitimate* to stop inquiry (in accordance with moderate skepticism) from those at which it would be illegitimate for it to cease.

### **3. Hume on Mystery and Causal Powers in General**

Let's collect these thoughts together. Given what we have said, Hume is well-placed to respond to many versions of the worries he (and others) raise about appeals to "faculties and occult qualities". In particular, the very structure of the science of man is designed to offer a response to concerns like Empirical Data, Simplicity, and Explanatory. And Unknown, Unknowable, and Inexplicable all seem to be principles that Hume would reject on independent grounds. Thus, in the remainder of this paper, I'm going to focus on the three versions of these concerns that remain at least somewhat worrisome for Hume – namely, Mystery, Teleological Mystery, and Contrary to Inquiry.

Of these, it is really the second and third that interest me. But to set the stage for our discussion of them, let's begin with a brief discussion of Mystery. Here the crucial question is why there should be anything fundamentally mysterious about faculties like reason or the imagination as they appear in the context of Hume's philosophy. After all, aren't such faculties, in their Humean form, defined in terms of their causal powers – such that to possess a Humean faculty like reason just is to possess the causal powers that are associated with it? If so, then possession of a Humean faculty involves little over and above possessing a bundle of such causal powers. And if this is right, can't Hume draw on his account of the nature of such powers (whatever we

take this to be) to answer any concern about them? In brief, if Hume's account of causal powers is a workable one, why is there any additional worry about faculties here?<sup>17</sup>

More precisely, while there is a great deal of disagreement about Hume's views on causation, nearly every reading of Hume on this issue treats his positive conception of causal powers as in *some* sense deflationary. For example, if we read Hume as a regularity theorist, there is little more to the notion of a causal power over and above the notion of a regularity in how something responds to certain stimuli. Thus, as Hume himself says, for the regularity theorist, the "distinction, which we often make betwixt POWER and the EXERCISE of it, is ... without foundation". (T 1.3.14.34) On such a view, there is nothing more to a philosophically legitimate conception of causal power beyond the expectation of a regularity in how things with that power will respond to certain stimuli. An expressivist reading of Hume, on the other hand, will add something further – insisting that our *full* idea of causal power involves a notion of necessary connection which expresses the feeling of ease which accompanies any transition in thought from cause to effect or vice versa. But nonetheless the expressivist also presents us with a broadly deflationary picture of Hume's conception of causal powers. And the same is *even* true of proponents of the "new Hume". For while they take Hume to posit the existence of causal powers in a more robust sense, they concede that, for Hume, we cannot form any *positive* or *adequate* conception of what these causal powers are. Thus, on their reading, our understanding of such powers is limited to a merely "relative idea" of them:

These words, *generation, reason*, mark only certain powers and energies in nature, whose effects are known, but whose essence is incomprehensible... (D 7.10)



Given this, one might think that *any* of these should give us the sort of deflated conception of “causal power” we need to make sense of Hume’s positive references to reason or the imagination as powers or faculties. After all, isn’t reason just a complex propensity to associate together perceptions in certain ways? And isn’t that the sort of thing that *any* reading of Hume must allow him access to? In brief, can’t we just plug in our preferred reading of Hume on causation, whatever that might be, to solve this puzzle?

For instance, isn’t possession of the capacity for probable reasoning just possession of a complex propensity to associate together perceptions in certain ways? Such powers might be ultimately inexplicable (or even mysterious) in the manner suggested by Hume’s Appendix second thoughts.<sup>18</sup> But isn’t that something that Hume would respond to by citing the modesty of his moderate skepticism with respect to such questions? So perhaps there is no real problem for Hume here after all?

#### **4. Hume on Teleological Mystery: Mental Faculties, Teleology, and Analogies in Thought**

Unfortunately, things are not quite so simple. For there is a further reason to be cautious about insisting that we can resolve these issues simply through an appeal to Hume’s general account of “causal powers”. After all, while mental faculties like reason surely are associated with various causal powers for Hume, they also seem to involve elements that are not common to all Humean causal powers as such. Most importantly for our purposes, is the fact that Hume often speaks of “reason” as if it has its own internal *aim* or *proper function* in some sense. This might be taken to be implicit in the very idea that reason is the faculty for “the discovery of truth or

falsehood” or Hume’s claim that, “Our reason must be considered as a kind of cause, of which truth is the *natural effect*”. (T 3.1.1.9, 1.4.1.1)<sup>19</sup> But this picture of reason is also hard to avoid with respect to many other passages. For example, consider Hume’s reference to “the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and taste” in the second *Enquiry*. (EM App 1.23, compare 1.4.1.12) Or his invocation of the idea that there is “always a real, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things” for the operations of reason in the *Sceptic*. (ESY S 13)

None of these passages is decisive, and one might dismiss them as ironic or otherwise insincere. But in fact there is no reason to think that thinking of faculties like “reason” in broadly teleological terms is foreign to Hume’s philosophy, provided that such references are understood correctly. After all, as Hume insists in his discussion of personal identity, when the mind attributes an identity over time to a system of parts, it generally does so because of “a reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some common end or purpose”. (T 1.4.6.11) Thus, for Hume, our tendency to ascribe identity over time to complicated systems is based in large part in the degree to which we treat those systems as functioning teleologically in the service of some end.

Moreover, although Hume does not explicitly mention mental faculties like reason in this context, he *is* clear that this sort of teleological organization is characteristic of the identity of *both* artifacts *and* “all animals and vegetables”. Indeed, in the later cases, a further element is added – namely, “a sympathy of parts to their common end” such that we “suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations”. (T 1.4.6.12) And these teleological elements would plainly be significant, for

Hume, for the identity of biological organs over time as well. So, there is no reason to think such points would not also apply to mental faculties like reason.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Hume's own account of how we ascribe "identity" to organs and faculties over time implies that, when conceived of as a natural power or organ of this sort, reason's "identity" over time will be determined in part by the ends we associate with it. To be sure, such ascriptions of identity over time always involve a fiction for Hume. But that is equally true of organs and faculties, and insofar as we treat reason as organ or faculty of this sort, it seems clear that its identity will be determined by the ends we associate with it. But while Hume is completely consistent in thinking of reason and other mental faculties in this way, his willingness to do so complicates his response to the worries we are considering. After all, if reason is not a bare causal propensity, but a bundle of such propensities *organized around certain ends or functions* ... well, that is beginning to look "rather more Peripatetic". For, it suggests that a worry like Teleological Mystery might apply to Hume's own conception of reason just as much as it does to the "Peripatetics".<sup>21</sup>

So how *would* Hume think about this sort of natural teleology? Here we can begin with what is, for Hume, the easiest case where we attribute an end or function to an object because we conceive of it as owing its existence – or at least its continuing existence within some pattern of use – to how it is useful and agreeable to some agent or agents. In such cases, we think of something as structured around certain ends because we literally attribute those ends to the agents who are responsible for the thing or its use.

Hume would not apply this model directly to faculties like reason or the imagination in the manner a theist would. But this does not prevent him from acknowledging various *analogies* between the order of causes in nature and such artifacts. Indeed, even the skeptical Philo admits in the *Dialogues*:

In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms. (D 10.36)

... the whole of natural theology ... resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.* (D 12.33)

Such passages suggest that, for Hume, we may think of human reason as having the end or function of “discovering truth or falsehood”, but only insofar as this involves treating reason as *analogous* in its structure and activity to a mechanism with that function, without literally ascribing the ends in question to anyone. In doing so, we would simply be allowing our thought about reason to be guided by the natural associations between (i) the functioning of human reason and (ii) the functioning of a hypothetical mechanism designed for such purposes or ends, but nothing more.<sup>22</sup>

As such, this way of thinking of the role of teleology is also useful with respect to another worry one might have about appeals to teleological concepts in the science of man – namely,

that such appeals necessarily trespass against Hume's understanding of the gap between "is" and "ought".<sup>23</sup> This is a topic about which there is little interpretative consensus. But if the role of teleology in natural science is *merely analogical*, it seems likely that this role will not be problematic for these reasons, however one understands Hume's views about the relationship between "is" and "ought".

### **5. Hume on Contrary to Inquiry: Hume's Burkean Conceptual Ethics**

Viewing Hume's teleological language in these contexts as analogical thus provides us with a way of understanding Hume's account of such faculties that seems acceptable by Hume's own standards. But this, on its own, does not explain why Hume makes use of such concepts or analogies in constructing the science of man. After all, surely one should not make use of *every* concept or analogy one can invent in that context? Nor does it, on its own, answer the final worry about such concepts noted above – that their use tends to cut off inquiry *prematurely*.

So, why *does* Hume make use of faculty concepts and analogies in the way he does? And why is he confident that his use of such concepts does not run afoul of Contrary to Inquiry in the manner that Hume claims is true of the "false philosophy of the ancients"? This, in effect, is a question in what has recently come to be called "conceptual ethics" – the study of potential changes to our conceptual or linguistic repertoire.<sup>24</sup> So, we can approach it by considering how Hume conceives of the standards that govern the proper use of linguistic terms and the general ideas that are associated with them.

For Hume, the proper use of linguistic terms – and the proper use of general ideas insofar as these are partially linguistic in nature – is always a conventional matter.<sup>25</sup> So questions about our linguistic or conceptual framework are always in part questions about the conventions that govern our collective linguistic activities. Given this, I take Hume’s answer to why we should conform to linguistic or conceptual conventions is that doing so embodies a particular sort of artificial virtue – what he sometimes calls “linguistic propriety”. Crucially, like all “artificial virtues”, linguistic propriety is biased *towards conformity* with existing conventions. But, at the same time, it only will recommend conformity *insofar* as it is generally conducive to the ends involved in the convention’s function.<sup>26</sup> Given this, we can compare Hume’s reluctance with respect to “linguistic” or “conceptual” revolutions to his more explicit reluctance to endorse revolutionary political or legal changes:

But though, on some occasions, it may be justifiable, both in sound politics and morality, to resist supreme power, it is certain, that in the ordinary course of human affairs nothing can be more pernicious and criminal ... The common rule requires submission; and it is only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place. (T 3.2.10.1)

Perhaps surprisingly, despite his stated willingness to commit much of philosophy to the flames, it seems likely that Hume would apply something like this moderate “Burkean conservatism” to questions in conceptual or linguistic ethics as well.<sup>27</sup> For most of the considerations that speak in favor of this view in the case of justice also seem to apply here. If so, then in considering whether we should adopt a revolution in our use of terms like “reason”,

we would need to consider whether this use involves the linguistic equivalent of “grievous tyranny and oppression”. This helps to explain why Hume continues to make extensive use of faculty concepts in his philosophy, even while systematically undermining their traditional pretensions. After all, Hume is happy to admit that when we reflect on many parts of nature, it is almost impossible for us *not* to think of them in teleological terms. (D 10.36) And this, in the context of a Burkean conceptual ethics, makes it completely unsurprising that Hume continues to make use of teleological analogies in speaking about our basic mental faculties.

Of course, such analogies *are* a natural source of various “fictions” and errors. But this does not mean that we should excise them from science or philosophy. For Hume takes much of reasoning to be guided by associations and analogies of this sort.<sup>28</sup> So while they can be a source of error, and should never be confused with “proofs”, it would be hopeless to try to reject them across the board. Rather, our best hope is to be clear-eyed about how they guide our thought and to strive to be guided by ones that do serve our ends.

In this context, it is particularly important that the use of teleological *analogies* will not tend to cut off inquiry in the manner the invocation of traditional “occult faculties” allegedly does. For an analogical use of teleological concepts does not render such qualities essentially mysterious in efficient causal terms. Rather, such analogies leave room for further explanations of the elements within the analogy in non-teleological terms.<sup>29</sup> This, I submit, is just how Hume would react to the developments in Darwinian natural science that arose in the next century. But the important point for present purposes that the use of such analogies, at least on its own, does not seem to run afoul of Contrary to Inquiry in the manner the positing of brute

teleological explanations does. In other words, if there is a sort of “fiction” involved in such teleological analogies, it is one that *promotes* further inquiry and so promotes the ends of the scientist of man. It is only when we go beyond such analogies to posit *brute teleological causes* in nature, that we begin to deal in a form of “fiction mongering” that hinders as opposed to helps these ends.

Thus, Hume’s view seems to be that it serves our epistemic and practical ends to be guided in the “science of man” by a conception of reason that relies on an analogy between reason and a machine for the discovery of truth. That is, we should regard claims about “reason” that are guided by this analogy as properly embodying the artificial virtue of linguistic propriety with respect to that term. After all, while this way of making use of “reason” is not free of certain dangers – such as the risk of encouraging excesses of “rationalist or Stoic enthusiasm” – the entirety of Hume’s philosophy can be seen as a demonstration that a “scientist of man” can develop a deeper and less mysterious account of the nature of the human mind while being guided by this analogy, thereby helping to support a form of life that is useful and agreeable to all.

Taking this together:

**Hume’s Faculties:** Humean mental faculties are defined by a system of Humean causal powers (in the relevant deflationary sense), which are organized so that they function analogously to a mechanism designed for certain ends or functions, in ways that are explanatorily fruitful in a variety of contexts and which capture a range of empirical data



through a relatively simple set of generalizations or principles, while also not foreclosing the possibility of developing further explanations of the inner functioning of the system in question, at least insofar as such inquiry is useful and agreeable for creatures like us.

So understood, Hume's appeals to mental faculties and power avoids the concerns he himself raises against the use other philosophers make of such notions – or at least that it does so insofar as Hume believes that such concerns can be avoided by anyone at all. In particular, if the arguments Hume presents are successful, the science of man itself offers a response to concerns like Empirical Data, Simplicity, and Explanatory with respect to Hume's Faculties. And Unknown, Unknowable, and Inexplicable are all principles that Hume would reject on independent grounds. Finally, Hume's Faculties avoids triggering worry insofar as it invokes a merely deflationary conception of the causal powers involved in said faculties, and it avoids Teleological Mystery in particular insofar as its appeals to teleology are understood merely analogically. And because such analogies generally encourage further inquiry, as opposed to cutting it off, Hume's Faculties do not trigger the worries that Contrary to Inquiry expresses.

But one might still worry that there is sense in which this still means that Hume must appeal to something like “the tactics of the Peripatetics” to save the foundations of his philosophy. In some sense, this would come as no surprise to Hume himself. After all, for Hume at least, his philosophy is *ultimately* no better off than any other when it comes to the need to “confess its ignorance” of certain foundational philosophical questions. And even a “true philosopher” like Hume finds it hard to avoid talk of mental faculties like reason or the

imagination in that context. But nonetheless Hume may feel he has the advantage over “the Peripatetics” here with respect to two further points. First, his philosophy finds it relatively easy to admit that it is ultimately ignorant of what these powers or faculties *really* are. And second, it can explain why it is justified in speaking in faculty-theoretic terms *even* given that ignorance. Thus, Hume may feel that his use of these tactics stands up to reflective scrutiny in ways the of use of them by “the Peripatetics” cannot.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Garrett 2015, 81) Garrett tells me that he would now amend this to read: “never hesitates to infer from the fact that the mind regularly does something of a particular recognizable kind that it has a power to do it and some faculty or other by which it does it,” but the essential point remains.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that such powers or faculties must always be realized by something that bears them for Hume, it is only to say that in many cases all we can know about those faculty-bearers is that they bear the powers and faculties in question. In this way, for Hume, our understanding of things often seems to bottom out with such powers and faculties. Compare the capacities-first reading of Kant in (Schafer 2023). For the importance of a focus on mental faculties and their activities for many of Hume’s arguments, see (Garrett 1997; 2015) and (Sayre-McCord 2008; Cohon 2008). Compare also the project of “mental geography” that characterizes the *Enquiries* as discussed by (Qu 2020), drawing on (Millican 2017).

<sup>3</sup> As (Cottrell forthcoming) argues, there is reason to think that Hume is more optimistic in the *Treatise* that faculty talk will ultimately be eliminable than he is later on. Here, as Cottrell argues, the famous “second thoughts” in the Appendix to the *Treatise* seem especially significant..

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Katherine Dunlop for help finding these texts, as well as many members of the audience in Berlin and at NYU (and especially Anja Jauernig) who pressed me to say more about this. As (Hutchison 1982) explains in detail, this confusion about what is problematic about “occult qualities” is to some degree symptomatic of shifts in the meaning of this complaint that occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In its scholastic use, “occult qualities” were opposed to “manifest” or sensible ones. Thus, in the scholastic usage “occult qualities” were unintelligible precisely because they were insensible and so not “manifest” to our cognitive capacities. In this sense of the term, the proponents of the new mechanical philosophy were actually *defenders* of “occult qualities” – that is, of complex explanatory principles that were not always manifest to the senses. But with the rise of the “new science”

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the primary meaning of “occult qualities” shifted so that it came to refer primarily to qualities that were unintelligible in the terms of mechanistic science. In this sense, it was the scholastics who were proponents of such qualities, and this is generally how Descartes and Hobbes use the term. Hume is clearly using “faculties and occult qualities” in this later sense, but there is some irony in how he (and many others) associates this term with the “Peripatetics”.

<sup>6</sup> See (Qu forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Remy Debes here.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Patrick Connolly here.

<sup>9</sup> See Descartes’ claim in the *Principles* that, “there are no qualities which are so occult, no effects of sympathy or antipathy so marvelous or so strange, nor any other thing so rare in nature (granted that it is produced by purely material causes destitute of thought and free will), that its reason cannot be given by [the principles of the mechanical philosophy]” (*Principles* IV.187, as quoted by Hutchinson).

<sup>10</sup> See (Garrett 2015; Cottrell 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Compare (Cottrell 2015; 2019) and (Ehli 2023), both of which read the Appendix as focused on such “principles of union” although the later limits this to our fictional idea of a “principle of union” underlying the unity of the self.

<sup>12</sup> In (Cottrell forthcoming), Cottrell argues for a version of this – namely, that these “second thoughts” force Hume to give up on his hope that faculty talk should be eliminable (in principle) from the science of man. I’m less sure than Cottrell that Hume would have embraced this commitment prior to the Appendix, but I agree that any hopes he might have of this sort are dashed there.

<sup>13</sup> Compare (Qu 2017). My reading of the Appendix may remind some of (Strawson 2011). For an insightful review of Strawson’s book, see (Ainslie 2012), to which this essay is in some ways a response.

<sup>14</sup> See Hume’s claim that, “We may learn from the foregoing, doctrine, that all causes are of the same kind, and that in particular there is no foundation for that distinction, which we sometimes make betwixt efficient causes and causes sine qua non; or betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material, and exemplary, and final causes.” (T 1.3.14.32)

<sup>15</sup> I draw here on the helpful discussion of (Hutchison 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Thanks again to Katherine Dunlop for drawing my attention to this text.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Kail(2020) reads Hume as a proponent of a “brute mechanical model” of reason. But we should be cautious about reading Hume as a confident proponent of the “mechanical philosophy”. See Hume’s description of Newton’s accomplishments in the *History*.

<sup>18</sup> Compare (Qu 2017).

<sup>19</sup> It is easy to read such claims as attributing to reason the natural function (in some sense) of “discovering the truth”. Compare T 1.4.4.1, and see (Schmitt 1992; 2014; Greenberg 2008; Goldhaber 2020; Lenz 2022).

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion of the “reason of animals” in T 1.3.16. Cottrell has pointed out to me that this connection seems to be confirmed by “Of the Immortality of the Soul: “Every thing is common between the soul and the body. The organs of the one are all of them the organs of the other. The existence therefore of the one must be dependent on that of the other.” (IS 35–36)

<sup>21</sup> For the same reasons, we should be cautious about describing Hume’s “science of man” as a “non-teleological account of human nature”. (Greco and O’Brien 2019) Compare (Schliesser and Demeter 2020).

<sup>22</sup> This would be a proto-Kantian approach. Note that such analogies might be understood in an expressivist fashion. Compare (Holden 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Cottrell here.

<sup>24</sup> See (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a; 2013b).

<sup>25</sup> There is much debate about whether general ideas are partially linguistic in Hume. See (Schafer 2019), and (Ainslie 2010; 2015; Waldow 2020; Lenz 2022).

<sup>26</sup> See (Sayre-McCord 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Compare 1.3.9.fn7. Note that this is not “conservatism” in a left-right sense.

<sup>28</sup> T 1.3.13.25.

<sup>29</sup> Compare the discussion of Kant’s views about teleology in (Proops 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Thanks to audiences in Berlin and at NYU for helpful comments. Thanks also to the editors of this volume, as well as Jonny Cottrell, Remy Debes, Katherine Dunlop, Aaron Garrett, Don Garrett, Anja Jauernig, Béatrice Longuenesse, Colin McLear, Peter Millican, Ian Proops, Hsueh Qu, Anat Schechtman, Nick Stang, and many others for feedback on this material.