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ON THE INTERPRETATION OF HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract
At the end of his life, Hume neglected his first work, and declared that he wished his readers to take into account only the later versions of his theories of the understanding, the passions and morals. This poses a special problem of interpretation: is there a difference between a "young Hume" and a "mature Hume", as in the case of Hegel, and several other thinkers? Is there in Hume's work anything comparable with the shift from the pre-critical to the critical Kant? I believe that Hume's case does not fall in any of these categories, but that it still poses problems analogous at least to the first, that is, Hegel's. This is the hypothesis this essay aims to investigate in the particular case of Hume's epistemology. I defend the view that a correct interpretation of Hume's epistemology only becomes possible after a careful reading of his more mature works. I illustrate this by discussing Hume's distinction between association by causation, on the one hand, and causal inference on the other, as well as his concept of experience.

Hume's work is a unique case in the history of philosophy. He left us a first book which he never republished, choosing instead to rewrite it in smaller ones with the same basic content, but with large differences under several aspects. At the end of his life he declared that he never acknowledged that first work, and that he wished his readers to take into account only the definitive versions of his theories of the understanding, of the passions and of morals. This poses a special problem of interpretation: is there a difference between a "young Hume" and a "mature Hume", as in the case of Hegel, and several other thinkers, as the non-philosopher Karl Marx? Is there in Hume's work anything comparable with the shift from the pre-critical to the critical Kant? I believe that Hume's case does not fall in any of these categories, but that it still poses problems analogous at least to the first, that is, the Hegel/Marx situation.

Of course, the main difference is, to restrict ourselves to the subject of the understanding, that in Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature* the young Hume presents a theory of knowledge that is fundamentally the same as the one we find in the first *Enquiry.* Disappointed with the reception of the first work, he wrote twelve essays in which we find some of the problems discussed in it, intituled, in 1748, *Philosophical Essays concerning*

Human Understanding, a title that would be replaced, in the 1751 edition, by another title suggesting a unified work: *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding.* I shall not discuss here the possible intentions of our author when he made these choices, but shall only repeat what many have remarked before me: if the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* was first called *Philosophical Essays*, it must be because the author did not intend it to be a unified version of the clearly unified exposition of Book 1 of the *Treatise.*

But those *Essays* cannot be reduced to something like a set of "selections" from Book 1 of the *Treatise*. On the other hand, only sections 2 to 7 present a consistent new version of Hume's theory of the understanding, to which we must add sections 11 and 12. Section 1 does not correspond to the Introduction to the *Treatise*, but consists in a completely new kind of preface, if we choose to call it so. Section 8 corresponds to themes of the book on the Passions, and sections 10 and 11 are entirely new. We know there was a first discussion of the problem of miracles, which the author chose to eliminate. But section 11, on the problems of theology and teleology is new, and more akin to the later *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* than to any subject in the *Treatise*.

Ten sections of the *Enquiry* correspond to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, and any reader is able to find in the first, among other things, a shorter version of Hume's theory of the understanding. Why then did its author, in his famous Advertisement to the last edition of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, express his wish that everybody refrained from regarding the *Treatise* "as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles"?[1] He presents some fragmentary explanations of his decision: "that juvenile work, which the author never acknowledged", had gone "to the press too early", and presented several "negligences" in its reasoning and in its expression.

One negligence that was probably due to haste in "going to the press" concerns the form of presentation of the third principle of association of ideas. After commenting on resemblance and contiguity, Hume adds: "As to the connection, that is made by the relation of *cause and effect*, we shall have occasion afterwards to examine it to the bottom, and

[1] *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (EHU), Tom Beauchamp, ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 83.

therefore shall not at present insist upon it."[2] Now, when Hume turns again to that kind of relation, he asserts that, contrary to resemblance and contiguity, it "is requisite to persuade us of any real existence",[3] which only makes sense if we take that relation to be more than a mere relation of association. It only makes sense in case it consists in the stronger relation in which are founded "all reasonings concerning matter of fact",[4] that is, concerning "real existence".[5]

Now, this is the beginning of Hume's argument about *causal inference*, an argument where there is no place for the subject of association, and this is part of Hume's final and definitive version of his epistemological theory. In the light of this theory, the third principle of association is not significantly stronger than the two others, and its discussion in the *Treatise* may receive a better interpretation if it is suspected, and perhaps recognized, that in the beginning of Book I Hume was not yet able to make a clear distinction between association by causation, on the one hand, and causal inference on the other, a distinction which is crystal clear in the *Enquiry*.[6] A coherent, if not true (for that, perhaps, would be too much to be hoped for…) interpretation of Hume's epistemology becomes possible only if we admit, not only that its definitive and correct version is that of the *Enquiry*, but also that the *Treatise* is guilty of mistakes that are perhaps "more in the manner than the matter", as Hume wrote in one of his letters, but that, as Dorothy Coleman once said in a Hume Conference in S. Paulo, are "more in the manner, but also in the matter."

The negligences in the *Treatise* affect the problem of the interpretation of Hume in a richer way than if that problem consisted simply in the coexistence of two different versions of the same theory, the first of them being disavowed by the author. We may imagine several possible attitudes. The first is the most common, and consists in ignoring the problem, studying and teaching Hume's epistemology as if there was a perfect compatibility between them, approaching each particular subject using the method of

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[2] *A Treatise of Human Nature* (THN) 1.1.4, David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, eds., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 13.
[3] THN 1.3.9, p. 76.
[4] EHU 4.1, p. 109.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 108.
[6] See my *Novos Estudos Humeanos,* Chapter 1, Discurso Editorial, S. Paulo, 2003, pp. 15 ff., where further examples of Hume's "negligences" concerning association and causation are discussed.

"indifferent quotation" that is, indiscriminately picking passages in both works in order to discuss that subject. This has been, I must confess, my own method for many years. It should be clear by now that, at least concerning the relation between association and causal inference, this method deserves to be revised. We may even wonder whether Hume, during the composition of the *Treatise*, had any clear notion of the difference between causal inference and association by causation: I was unable to find in that work a single example of association by cause and effect. On the other hand, we find in the more mature, definitive version of his epistemology a clear example of this kind of association: (…) "if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it." And in a note Hume gives this an indubitable name: "Cause and effect", (EHU 3.3), that is, unequivocally, association of ideas by cause and effect, or by causation. And it is evident that this relation between wounds and pains is not an example of causal reasoning… We shall see below that another example of association by cause and effect was given in the *Abstract*.

On the other hand, the *Treatise* may be considered the greatest explosion of philosophical genius to occur in the first half of the XVIIIth century, and the comparison between Book 1 and the first *Enquiry* shows that, if the latter is clearly a corrected version, containing a more perfect philosophy of knowlewdge, as Hume himself more than suggests, the first included several themes and developments whose suppression we must regret. We miss the clarity and scope of the Introduction, as well as of the distinction between memory and imagination in 1.3 and the enumeration of the philosophical relations in 1.5, even though we are apt to feel differently about the absence of the Lockean themes of modes and substances. We may also regret the loss of the development of the subject of space and time in 2.1 to 6, although the rather obscure section 7 about the problem of existence was perhaps mercifully suppressed.

In Part 3 we have the bewildering addition, as a *fourth* principle of association of ideas, of something like "association by repetition" (in 3.14), followed by the strange contention that this "true principle of association among ideas" is "the very same with that between the ideas of cause and effect, and (…) an essential part in all our reasonings from that relation" (3.15). In my chapter on these problems, quoted in note 6 above, I hope to

have shown that no reasoning directly depends on this or any other principle of association, but only on the influence of custom or habit on our imagination, as the *Enquiry* strongly maintains. But we must read 3.15 on "other habits" to fully understand that the Humean concept of custom is much stricter than the common one. Also, the subject of probabibily has been too strictly contracted in EHU 6, and we ought to miss sections 11 to 13 in the *Treatise* (1.3). Also, Section 15 on general rules, whose importance has been rightly emphasized in Fred Wilson's *Hume's Defence of Causal Inference*,[7] must be carefully read in order to understand some important aspects of Hume's general epistemology.

Finally, Part 4, on several forms of scepticism and on two delicate subjects, the immateriality of the soul and personal identity, presents us a different set of problems. Beginning with the last: Hume himself declares in a letter his insatisfaction with his own treatment of the problem of personal identity, but the persistence of the subject through time, with dozens of Hume scholars writing on it, may lead us to suspect that he was too harsh in his judgment on himself, and that he suppressed that section for reasons still to be discovered. Suppression of the section on the soul may find a satisfactory explanation in Hume's writing of the essay with the resemblant title "Of the Immortality of the Soul", although the two texts differ in several important respects. But the discussion of scepticism, although reduced in the new version to some pages of the *Enquiry* (12), is a simpler version that may help us to understand, as I believe it should, that Hume was not a sceptic of any other kind but his own particular brand: a special form of "academical scepticism" totally new in his time, which may be taken as an important step towards Peirce's fallibilism and, perhaps, of most "ex-analytical" philosophers of the 20th century.

All this leaves us in a rather complicated situation. If Hume's advertisement was meant to lead us to neglect the *Treatise*, we clearly would have to say "no", with all due respect. Not only would that be a loss to our philosophical culture, but we wouldn't be able to discuss important points like (one among many) the question of "other habits". But if he meant to lead us to give a strong priority to the *Enquiry*, ignoring all passages in the *Treatise* that are incompatible with it, and abstaining to argue from any part of that "juvenile work" against Hume himself, or against the interpretations that may be suggested,

[7] Fred Wilson, *Hume's Defence of Causal Inference*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

in the *first* place, only by the *Enquiry*, in that case we should entirely assent to the suggestion of our philosopher. Priority of the mature version, but no global rejection of the younger Hume: this might be a provisional guide for our interpretation of his epistemology.

But one cannot help rejecting some passages in the *Treatise*, in the light of Hume's mature epistemology, as we can find it the *Enquiry*. The very concept of experience is a case in point. We read in that juvenile work:

> The nature of experience is this. We remember to have had frequent instances of the existence of one species of objects; and also remember, that the individuals of another species of objects have always attended them, and have existed in a regular order of contiguity and succession with regard to them. Thus we remember to have seen that species of object we call *flame*, and to have felt that species of sensation we call *heat*. We likewise call to mind their constant conjunction in all past instances. Without any farther ceremony, we call the one *cause*, and the other *effect*, and infer the existence of the one from that of the other.[8]

Hume then describes this as the discovery of constant conjunction as a "new relation" between cause and effect. Now, the only "negligence" we may detect in this otherwise impeccable version of his theory of inference is that it implies that the nature of experience includes *repetition*, under the form of constant conjunction, when even in the same work, a dozen pages after this definition of experience, we see that even for the younger Hume what is essential to have experience is simply to have *conjunction* of kinds of phenomena, even without repetition.

"(…) not only in philosophy, but even in common life, we may attain the knowledge of a particular cause merely by one experiment, provided it be made with judgment, and after a careful removal of all foreign and superfluous circumstances."[9] This becomes possible "when we have lived any time",[10] which means that repetition is part of "the nature of experience" only … when we have had only very little experience. After that, if one wants to define the nature of experience one should say that experience occurs when we observe *conjunctions* of phenomena, either repeatedly or in "single experiments". In the absence of any conjunction, Hume generally speaks of simple *survey*, not of experience,

[8] THN 1.3.6, p. 61.
[9] THN 1.3.8, p. 73. I discuss this subject in my *Novos Estudos Humeanos*, ed. cit., Chapter 3, pp. 65 ff.
[10] EHU 9.5, note, p. 167.

although he never explicitly established this difference in vocabulary. But Hume's epistemology certainly isn't, as we may see when our own reading of it is not … negligent, anything like "a slave of repetition"… This is a case when a possible misinterpretation may be avoided even if we resort only to the *Treatise*, but even here the *Enquiry*, as we have seen, helps to clarify such an important subject as that of the nature of experience in Hume's philosophy.

The problem of Hume's particular kind of scepticism is quite intractable in the *Treatise* (no pun intended), not so much because of any negligences properly so called, but simply due to a certain imprecision in the statement of the philosopher's position towards Pyrrhonism and other forms of scepticism. The inspiration for Popkin's assignment of a kind of Pyrrhonian scepticism to Hume derives from certain vague phrases in that juvenile work, like for instance the following:

> The intense view of the manifold contradictions and imperfections of human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion as more probable or likely than another.[11]

Now, it is almost understandable that Popkin, commenting on this same passage, jumps to such conclusions as the following:

> A close examination of Hume's views will show that he agreed with the Pyrrhonian theory of the inability to find any rational and certain basis for our judgments (…); we have no ultimate criterion for determining which of our conflicting judgments in certain fundamental areas of human knowledge are true, or to be preferred.[12]

The spirit of the *Treatise* does ambiguously seem to authorize such interpretations. But even Popkin's moderate thesis (he also insists in Hume's critique of Pyrrhonism, as we see in the very title of his paper), is corrected by Hume's definition of scepticism in the *Enquiry*:

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[11] THN 1.4.7, p. 175.

[12] Richard Popkin, "David Hume: his Pyrrhonism and his critique of Pyrrhonism", in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Hume*, Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 56-7.

> (…) scepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense, and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments (…) To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences; though by these means we shall make both a slow and short progress in our systems; are the only methods, by which we can ever hope to reach truth, and attain a proper stability and certainty in our determinations.[13]

I think it is needless to insist in Hume's reference, in his mature philosophy, to truth and certainty; even in a sceptical key, Popkin's interpretation cannot make sense of this philosophy. The mature Hume was what he clearly says that he was: a mitigated sceptic (or, again, a kind of fallibilist), not any other kind of sceptic.

In all three cases examined here, the latter passage seems to contradict the first. And I believe it is sounder to accept that it really does, expressing a deep change in Hume's epistemology, than to accept what Flew called "the Infallibility Assumption", which consists in "insisting that where two passages in an author appear to be inconsistent, one of these passages has to be so interpreted that the apparent inconsistency is resolved". Flew ridicules this assumption, adding that it should never be confused with

> the entirely sound and proper rule that we should always employ all the resources of scholarship in the attempt to show, what may of course turn out not to be true, that any apparent absurdities or apparent inconsistencies in our author are when properly understood neither absurdities nor inconsistencies.[14]

I agree with Flew's position. In the problems of interpretation examined in this paper, I think that we should not adopt any dogma of infallibility, at the same time that the second rule, although is is quite reasonable in itself, is equally improper to be applied here. Instead, I believe we should reflect on the problems I mentioned first, about the peculiar character of Hume's work: in this work taken as a whole there is no sharp difference, like in Kant or Hegel, between the two versions of his philosophy, to whose epistemological aspect I restrict myself here, but there still are important differences, and these should be taken seriously and examined with the utmost care.

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[13] EHU 12.1.4, p. 200.

[14] Antony Flew, "On the Interpretation of Hume", V. C. Chappell, ed., *Hume*, ed. cit., p 280. This paper, whose title obviously inspired mine, is about some problems in Hume's moral philosophy.

In the interpretation proposed above I only tried to show some significant differences between the young and the mature Hume. But there is still room for further questions, mainly about *why* there are such differences, between works after all relatively similar in content like those examined here. To these second-order questions only one standard intrepretation may suffice, mainly that Hume simply noticed and corrected some of his mistakes or negligences. But maybe more than one interpretation is in order, perhaps a different one in each case, to account for what Noxon considered to have been our philosopher's "philosophical development".[15]

In the first place, the *Treatise* reveals a desire to explain causal inferences in terms of association. This produced a muddle that remains as one of the main negligences in that work, as it seems to me to be clear enough. Much less clear is perhaps the exact nature of the motivation that led Hume to insist on that untenable explanation in the framework of his thought, first giving us the impression that he did not clearly distinguish between association by causation and causal inference, as we have seen above, and secondly, as I have tried to show in my *New Studies*, introducing in the *Treatise*, some dozens pages after his enumeration of only three principles of association of ideas, an ambiguously presented fourth principle of association of ideas, which we may call "association by repetition".[16]

Why would Hume resort, in part 3 of Book 1, to a Lockean concept of association, incompatible with the three ones, in part Aristotelian, that he had introduced in Part 1? From this moment on, all possible interpretations we may propose must be by far more speculative and uncertain than the precedent ones. But, with this in mind, we may perhaps dare to notice that in the Introduction to the same work Hume defends that in the science of man, like Newton in natural science, "we must endeavour to render our principles as universal as possible, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes."[17]

Could Hume have been unable to resist to the temptation of explaining human knowledge by one principle instead of several ones, and elect association for that central role? We may notice that, when he first presented his concept of association, he famously said that those "principles of union or cohesion among our simples ideas" are comparable to

[15] James Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973.
[16] See the first chapter of my book, pp. 24 ff.
[17] THN Introduction, p. 5.

"a kind of Attraction, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms."[18] Newton had explained a great variety of phenomena by gravitational attraction; could Hume feel tempted to try to explain the human mind by only one principle, namely, association? We know that he couldn't achieve this, and he also knew this at least in 1748, when he published an *Enquiry* where association and habit, at least, are principles of comparable importance, and both are indispensable to explain the phenomena of knowledge and many others, thus proposing an explanation where not one, but two principles or more, concur in the production of mental phenomena.

Another case in point is that of the *Abstract*, an anonymous pamphlet where in 1740 Hume tried to present Book 1 of his *Treatise* to the general public. The most developed subject is that of causation, but in the last paragraph Hume adds that, among the "new discoveries in philosophy" presented in that work, "if anything can entitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, it is the use he makes of the principle of association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy."[19] There is a vast difference between these high ambitions concerning the scope of association in Hume's epistemology and the role to which association is reduced in the *Enquiry*, a role already mentioned in the*Treatise*: connecting ideas in the imagination, giving it a certain regularity, and binding simple ideas in complex ones.[20] And also the secondary role of serving as an *illustration* of the principle of transition of vivacity from impressions that is responsible for the production of the lively ideas that we call "beliefs".[21] That is, by the time of the publication of the *Treatise* our philosopher apparently thought that his principles of association could have a role comparable to Newtonian universal attraction. But from 1748 on he never allows these pious hope to be revived, choosing instead, in all the eight editions the *Enquiry* had until his death, to give the central role in the production of causal reasoning to custom or habit, a principle that has nothing to do with association of ideas.

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[18] THN 1.1.4, p. 14.
[19] David Hume, *An Abstract of a Book lately published, entitled A Treatise of Human Nature, etc.",* which was included at the end of the Norton edition of THN. The quotation is from p. 416, in which we also find the association between father and son as a (first) example of association by cause and effect.
[20] EHU 3.1, p. 101.
[21] EHU 5.2, pp. 126-9.

Hume's careless definition of experience only by repetition in the *Treatise* (1.3.6) quoted above also conflicts with one of the most important passages in the *Enquiry*. That definition suggests, to say the least, that our typical road to the acquisition of empirical knowledge consists in having repeated experiences of conjunctions. But in the *Enquiry* (5.1.5) we find a new face of Hume's epistemology, more theoretical than empiricist, when we see that his theory about the discovery of causal relations by repeated experiences is not an empirical description of everybody's inferences, but exclusively concerns only what we may call a "primeval subject", the theoretical invention of an imaginary knowing subject. This subject is a person "endowed with the strongest faculties of reason and reflection", but one who never had any kind of experience, for she has been "brought on a sudden into this world", and must have some repeated experiences before she can reach her first causal conclusions.[22] It is for this kind of theoretical being, whom we obviously can never meet in real life, that "the nature of experience" can be understood in terms of repeated experience alone. One should perhaps speak of a kind of "mitigated empiricism" as the mark of Hume's epistemology. This mitigated empiricism has a double face. First, the real knowing subject is not supposed to need repeated experience to make causal discoveries, these being possible also starting from a single observation of one conjunction followed by a relatively complex and partly deductive inference. And second, while experience surely is the condition of all knowledge of the world, Hume's own theory never consists in conclusions derived from observation of our verifiable cognitive behaviour, but is supported by the theoretical invention of the primeval subject, a being who is not empirically accessible. Of course, in his first work Hume had not discovered this, whence the air of "simple empiricism" that pervades that work. A correct interpretation of Hume's philosophy, here as elsewhere, only becomes possible after a careful reading of his more mature works.

Hume's scepticism, as we have seen, also cannot be rightly interpreted unless we, not only make a careful reading of his definitive epistemology, but also go through the pains of an even more careful reading of the juvenile work where our philosopher may sometimes seem to have fallen in some kind of radical or pyrrhonian scepticism. Maybe he hesitates, or maybe he is guilty of some negligences, as he himself admits. But we, as

[22] EHU 5.1.3, p. 120.

readers who want to do justice to the greatest philosopher of the English language, who was also perhaps the greatest philosopher of the eighteenth century, should never allow ourselves any negligence in the study of Hume, like for instance opting for the easy "method" of presenting all his texts without a clear distinction between the less careful work which he wrote in his youth and his more solid and definitive philosophy.

Problems concerning the interpretation of Hume's philosophy, either the epistemology discussed here, or the moral, metaphysical or political aspects of his work, shall always be open to discussion and criticism. No particular version can aspire to achieve general agreement. I only hope that every problem and every passage in Hume's work receives a careful and impartial examination from Hume scholars in general. For a fruitful discussion, perhaps each one could indicate which possible findings in Hume's writings would lead her to change at least one of her cherished interpretations. For my part, if I could be shown, in Hume's mature works, any clear defence of associationism about causation, or of common empiricism, or of anything equivalent to pyrrhonism, I would gladly change my views about Hume's epistemology.

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