

ABSTRACT

FARKAS, LAURA. "David Hume and the Art of the Essay as Philosophy," (Under the direction of Dr. Anthony LaVopa)

This thesis examines the career of David Hume as philosopher and essayist. David Hume is one of the first Men of Letters to make a living strictly through his publications. That fact points to a significant change in the idea of patronage. Instead of working for and catering to an aristocratic patron, Hume targeted a collective readership, a market.

That is not to say, however, that the philosopher "dumbed down" his thought. For, in fact, the essay format, with its conversational tone and easier accessibility, is actually perfectly suited for conveying Hume's particular philosophy of human nature. David Hume stressed the value of lived experience, and the human life experience is social at its core. In other words, to study humans in their social context is the best way to get at the fundamentals of human nature. The life of the community involves politics, economics, friendships, and personal relationships. For David Hume, these are *the* proper topics for philosophical inquiry.

Hume envisioned a modern readership that is characterized by its belief in the positive aspects of human sociability. In part, this is due to the dramatic changes taking place in British society due to commercialization. "Give and take" interaction was highly valued because that is how commerce works. That value seeped into other aspects of culture. David Hume believed there were some people within the culture of sociability, who though not *learned* in the sense of a trained philosopher such as himself, nevertheless wanted to think of their lives in a philosophical manner. In this study I hope to show the remarkable convergence of form, content, and context that emerges in David Hume's work as he addresses this audience.

David Hume and the Art of the Essay as Philosophy

by

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DEDICATION

For Brian,
With whom everything is possible.

BIOGRAPHY

Laura Farkas has never taken a history class she didn't love. And she has taken a lot! Her main approach is how people think-why people make the decisions they do. She conceives this focus as a blend of intellectual and cultural history. Although most of her work to this point has concentrated on Modern Europe, she would love the opportunity to learn about the intellectual history of Asian cultures. That said, Laura still feels the need to understand more about late nineteenth and early twentieth century European history. Too bad there are only 24 hours in a day.

Laura's primary love is her family. Brian Farkas, Ph.D. is her partner in life and love. They have two daughters, Rachel (13) and Hannah (9). Their home is filled with music and books, and a poker game now and then.

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David Hume (1711-1776) began composing his *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1727 at age sixteen. In spite of ten years of labor and revision, his attempt to apply the Newtonian concepts of ‘cause and effect’ to human behavior and morality did not fare well. Hume recalls, “Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots.”¹ Yet David Hume became a celebrated philosopher in his day. How can that be if no one read his philosophy? David Hume achieved fame because he dropped the formal treatise format, targeted an audience, and became an essayist.

This paper maps the circumstances surrounding that decision. Its other purpose is to describe what I see as a remarkable convergence in Hume’s *Essays* of form, content, and historical context. The *Essays* are not merely “easier reads” than the *Treatise*, although that is certainly the case. The essay format expresses the core of Hume’s thought in the best way possible. The *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (first published in 1741) ARE his philosophical thought.² In other words, Hume never stopped thinking and delivering as a philosopher.

An impressive list can be made of the dramatic changes that occurred in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment (1680’s-1789). We are entering a world in the wake of intense religious warfare and religious tensions still run high. Britain recently underwent its Glorious Revolution that established a legitimate political check on monarchical

¹David Hume, “My Own Life,” *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis), p. xxxiv

² All of Hume’s *Essays* discussed here come from Hume, David, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis), 1987, based on the 1777 edition originally published as vol.1 of *Essays and treatises on several subjects*.

authority, yet in France, the absolutist character of the monarchy intensified. Historian Zachary Schiffman describes an atmosphere in which awareness of the variety and complexity of the world, as it is experienced daily, was increasing exponentially during the early modern period. Contact with ancient history provided comparison and contrast with contemporary Christian Europe. The discovery of “new” worlds provided comparison and contrast amongst contemporary people and cultures. And as Schiffman puts it, “the advent of printing had not only accelerated the effects of all these changes but had also created an information explosion.”³ The dramatic changes and discoveries of the Enlightenment generated new approaches to fundamental philosophical questions and new ways of communicating them. Hume’s biographer, Ernest Campbell Mossner expresses the significance of David Hume’s turn to the essay format when he states,

Like his earlier counterpart of the Renaissance, the ideal man of letters of the Enlightenment might still take all knowledge as his province; but for the first time in the history of mankind his circle of readers was enlarged to include the majority of the public.⁴

Mossner is rightly impressed by the dramatic changes in print culture during the Enlightenment. The expansion of the print industry throughout the eighteenth century is an important element in the story of David Hume’s life as a scholar and will be looked at below. However it is more accurate to say that Hume’s audience included a portion of the *reading* public, which although expanded from earlier eras, still included only a minority of Britain’s population. It is difficult to establish just how much of the public

³ Zachary S. Schiffman, “Montaigne and the Rise of Skepticism in Early Modern Europe: A reappraisal,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol.45, no.4 ct.1984), 515.

⁴ Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980), p.3.

did read the work of David Hume. In his autobiographical essay, “My Own Life,” Hume informs us that his essays did sell better than the *Treatise*. He recalls,

...my bookseller, A. Millar, informed me, that my former publications (all but the unfortunate *Treatise*) were beginning to be the subject of conversation; that the sale of them was gradually increasing, and that new editions were demanded.⁵

In 1752 Hume published a collection essays entitled *Political Discourses*, which sold so well that a second edition was printed within a year and a third in 1754.⁶ It was his *History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* that made him famous, and consequently caused some curious readers to take a look other things he had written. Hume describes the response to his second and third volumes of the *History*...

...the copy-money given me by the booksellers, much exceeded any thing formerly known in England; I was become not only independent, but opulent.⁷

In fact, Hume’s biographer reports that David Hume was “the first distinguished man of letters in Britain to earn a modest fortune from literature alone.”⁸ Hume’s fame even reached across the channel to France. Hume recalls,

Those who have not seen the strange effects of modes, will never imagine the reception I met with at Paris, from men and women of all ranks and stations. The more I *resiled* from their excessive civilities, the more I was loaded with them.⁹

⁵ David Hume, “My Own Life,” p.xxxvi.

⁶ Eugene F. Miller, “Foreword,” Hume, David, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, p.xiii.

⁷ David Hume, “My Own Life,” p.xxxvi. *History of England* was published in six volumes between 1754 and 1762, beginning with the Stuart reign, working back to the Tudors, then pre-Tudors.

⁸ Mossner, p.4

It is possible that a famous writer may be talked about by many, but only read by relatively few. Hence, all we can confidently infer about Hume's readership is how he himself envisioned it. David Hume's estimation of his target audience is a significant component of this study.

Precursors

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), The Founder of the Modern Essay

David Hume once listed the "entertaining moralists" who he believed were helpful in "nurturing his philosophical self back to serenity, once it has been agitated."¹⁰ The list includes Plutarch, Lucian, Cicero, Seneca, Montaigne, and Shaftesbury. The present history begins with the influence of Michel de Montaigne, considered the founder of the modern essay as literary medium. The first edition of Montaigne's *Essays* appeared in 1580.¹¹ Montaigne famously asserted, "Every man has within himself the entire human condition."¹² He uses his reflections on life as representative of human nature in general, a device that immediately brings the writer and reader figuratively near to each other. No matter what their actual social status, they have the experience of being human in common.

⁹ *ibid*, p.xxxix, editor notes the italicized word means "recoiled."

¹⁰ David Hume, note to the text of "The Sceptic," in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987), p.179.

¹¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. Donald Frame, (Stanford University Press, Stanford), 1976.

¹² Michel de Montaigne, quoted in, *The Art of the Personal Essay An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. with introduction by Phillip Lopate, (Anchor Books by Doubleday, NY, 1994), p. xxiii

Another hallmark of the modern essay form is its conversational approach. Montaigne strikes a conversational, almost stream-of consciousness tone with the *Essays*. The effect is a sense of congeniality, or even intimacy, that adds to the sense that the reader and author are in some sense peers. In the *Essays* David Hume is conversational, usually in the first person. Many of the *Essays* feel casual, as if one is enjoying a pleasant encounter in a coffee house or around a dinner table with friends. At one point in the essay, “Of Polygamy and Divorces,” for example, Hume shares,

I cannot, at present, recollect my authorities, but I have somewhere read, that the republic of Athens, having lost many of its citizens by war and pestilence, allowed every man to marry two wives, in order the sooner to repair the waste which had been made of these calamities.¹³

David Hume is known to have meticulously re-edited and revised his writing right up until his death. Yet he never consulted his sources to verify the information and cite it properly? He just read it somewhere? Hume scholar Donald Livingston explains, “After the *Treatise*, Hume wrote in narrative, dialog, and historical forms. These are all forms of writing admirably suited to communicating the thoughts of participants in an activity,” i.e., members of a sociable or conversible community.¹⁴ Sociability is a key component of Enlightenment intellectual and cultural history. Literary historian Elena Russo describes the atmosphere of sociability as the place “where writing is informed by communal activity, traditional boundaries of genre and gender have been redrawn, and reason is the product of embodied interest.”¹⁵ In other words, the act of reasoning is a

¹³ David Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, p.182.

¹⁴ Donald Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London), 1984.

¹⁵ Elena Russo, “Editor’s Preface, Exploring the Conversible World,” *Yale French Studies*, vol.92, (1997), p.2

social process, an exchange of ideas and viewpoints that work into the reasoning process of an individual forming his or her personal opinion or viewpoint. What is meant by “embodied interest” is the assertion of a distinct personal identity into the written work, as in conversation. The author is presenting himself as someone the reader can hypothetically get to know as a fellow human being. The essay format, then, brings more to the page than its content alone.

Montaigne points to Hume with his content, as well as form. One pertinent example is the distinction Montaigne makes between the world of formal education and what he sees as the actual world in which people engage in real life decision-making. Hume will articulate these communities as the *Learned* world of isolated philosophy and the *Conversable* world that exemplifies what he terms “Common Life.”¹⁶ Montaigne writes in his essay, “Of Pedantry” regarding learning and judgment, “even though both parts are necessary, and both must be present, still in truth it is a fact that learning is less valuable than judgment.”¹⁷ David Hume’s philosophy begins with the conviction that lived experience is the only legitimate basis for knowledge. In the introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume asserts,

And as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation.¹⁸

The pedant of Montaigne’s conception resembles the learned man of Hume’s. They share the misconception that the heart of life’s questions and answers can be

¹⁶ David Hume, “Of Essay Writing,” p.533-537.

¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Pedantry,” p.103.

reached via self-imposed scholarly isolation, or on the trail of speculation and metaphysics. Neither is natural or real. Hume's aim is to bring what he viewed as "chimerical" philosophy to life and legitimacy.

Another notion Hume shares with Montaigne is the connection between intellectual rigor and poor health. In his essay, "On Some Verses of Virgil," Montaigne suggests his health becomes vulnerable from too much time contemplating "grave and serious" issues. He confesses, "I defend myself against temperance as I once did against sensual pleasure; for it pulls me too far back, even to the point of insensibility."¹⁹ David Hume will describe Montaigne's mental self-preservation as an essential element in human nature. Human nature has a way of letting the mind know when it is in danger of becoming unbalanced in its processes.

In 1734, while in the midst of developing his philosophical system, Hume wrote a letter to a physician. This letter is one of the only letters written by Hume discovered from this crucial period.²⁰ In it, he describes the mental wall he hit while composing the *Treatise*. Hume confesses, "All my ardour seemed in a moment to be extinguished, and I could no longer raise my mind to that pitch, which formerly gave me such excessive pleasure."²¹ Hume diagnosed himself with the 'Disease of the Learned,' which he appears to have gleaned from familiarity with the popular book *The English Malady; or, a Treatise of Nervous diseases of all kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits,*

¹⁸ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Faye Norton and Mary J. Norton, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), p.4.

¹⁹ Michel de Montaigne, "Of some Verses of Virgil," p.639.

²⁰ David Hume, "A Letter to a Physician," in *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, vol. I, John Hill Burton, (Burt Franklin, NY,) 1846, It does not appear that this letter was actually ever sent and it is not clear to whom, exactly, Hume addressed it.

Hypochondriacal Distempers, &c., (1733) by the Scottish doctor living in London, Dr. George Cheyne. Hume relates that he hit the wall during a long period of isolated and intense study. He reveals that in solitude, reflecting on death, poverty, shame, and pain, generated by his reading of Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch: “Some scurvy spots broke out on my fingers the first winter I fell ill...”²² Hume blames the condition on his extended period of isolation and intense thought. That his body became decrepit was human nature’s sign that he was on the wrong track. Hume’s philosophy will come to include a belief in the connection between sound intellectual positions and sound mental health. In the letter to the doctor, Hume goes on to describe the remedy he discovered for his disease. He began to study moderately and...

Only when I found my spirits at their highest pitch, leaving off before I was weary and trifling away the rest of my time in the best manner possible [was I] able to make considerable progress in my former designs.

Hume observed that keeping himself of sound mind actually improved his thinking. He continues:

...My disease was a cruel encumbrance on me. I found I was not able to follow out any train of thought, by one continued stretch of view, but by repeated interruptions, and by refreshing my eye from time to time upon other objects. Yet with this inconvenience I have collected the rude materials for many volumes...²³

Hume’s crisis, far from preventing him from achieving philosophical insight, actually generated it, and further validated the power of human nature. I contend that in Hume’s thought there is a correlation between physical and mental isolation and

²¹ *ibid*, p.31.

²² *ibid*, p.32.

²³ *ibid*, p.36

philosophical abstraction. Both are removed from what is real and cause illness and untenable philosophical positions. Hume comes to the understanding that the philosopher, who engages in solitary contemplation with the belief that he is fortifying himself from meaningless distractions, is actually crippling his mind. This is the pedant of Montaigne's thought, who removes himself from real life decisions and interactions. The insightful philosopher is sociable. Enjoyable interaction with fellow human beings brings the thinker back to balance in his life, which preserves his philosophical integrity. This idea will be developed more fully later in this analysis of Hume's turn to the essay format and embrace of the print community.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, The Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713)

The Third Earl of Shaftesbury states, "The Writing gathers life."²⁴ That is his characterization of the emerging relationship between essay writing and public opinion. The Earl noticed that the printed and published ideas of thinkers and those with opinions to share generated responses, often attacks, which in turn generated more printed pieces for publication. One can sense the Earl's ambivalence toward the phenomenon when he states with sarcasm:

This gives the Author his Edge, and excites the Reader's Attention; when the Trumpets are then sounded to the Crowd, and a kind of

²⁴The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, "Miscellany I, Chapter 2, Dialog Between our Author and His Bookseller," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. III, ed. Lawrence E. Klein, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), p.343. David Hume acquired Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* in 1726 and proceeded to follow through with the recommended reading program, according to the *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, Alan Kors, editor in chief, (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, NY, 2003), p.235.

Amphitheatrical Entertainment exhibited to the Multitude, by these
Gladiatorian Pen-men.²⁵

The Third Earl of Shaftesbury was an aristocrat of very high rank, and one of the most powerful political figures in Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In his time, labor of any kind, even intellectual, was viewed as beneath such a man. Yet, Shaftesbury was inclined toward philosophy, an inclination no doubt nurtured by his childhood tutor, John Locke.²⁶

Shaftesbury expressed aristocratic disdain for the publishing industry and ‘public opinion,’ in the statement quoted above, especially by his use of the terms “multitude” and “Crowd,” words that in Shaftesbury’s usage have negative connotations. Throughout his formal philosophical Treatise, his essays, and his workbooks, Shaftesbury seems almost afraid of the reading public.²⁷ He is concerned about how to participate in the very stimulating atmosphere of print culture without losing himself, his values- his identity. He had the notion that he needed to fortify himself for social interactions, especially those on the level of idea exchange. There is a tension in Shaftesbury to always maintain the appearance of elite masculinity. He had the belief that catering to a public audience implied the degradation of his writing and content. He complains,

Our modern authors, on the contrary, are turned and modeled, as themselves confess, by the public relish and current humour of the times. They regulate themselves by the irregular fancy of the world and frankly own that they are preposterous and absurd in order to accommodate

²⁵ Shaftesbury, “Miscellany I, Chapter 2”, p.343. The titles by Shaftesbury enclosed in quotation marks all come from *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1999.

²⁶ There is one biography of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury of which I am aware, Robert Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 1671-1713*, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge), 1984.

²⁷ Shaftesbury published his formal Treatise, *Enquiry Concerning Virtue* in 1699.

themselves to the genius of the age. In our days the audience makes the poet, and the bookseller the author, with what profit to the public or what prospect of lasting fame and honour to the writer, let anyone who has judgment imagine.²⁸

Nevertheless, Shaftesbury composed a variety of experimental and accessible essays and had them published in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinion, Times* (1711). He states,

And nothing cou'd better serve this popular purpose [freeing the spirit and the wit], than the way of Miscellany, or common Essay; in which the most confus'd Head, if fraught with a little Invention, and provided with Common-place-Book Learning, might exert itself to as much advantage as the most orderly and well-settled judgment.²⁹

Engaging with a reading public via the essay format was almost a duty for Shaftesbury. Because of his belief in the importance of lived experience and sociability to comprehending the human animal, he recognized the value of communicating his thoughts in what he called, “this modern written form.”³⁰ He also saw the potential for enlightening readers of the more ‘confus’d’ type.

Shaftesbury’s miscellaneous essays are ostensibly addressed to his personal friends, and they exhibit a conversational, yet definitely aristocratic tone. In fact, Lord Shaftesbury maintained the image of the aristocrat who did not dally in something so common as print culture. The evidence reveals, however, the meticulous care he brought to the project of bringing his work to publication.³¹ Shaftesbury resolved his reluctance to enter the public arena by acknowledging merit in the testing of ideas that comes from

²⁸ Shaftesbury, “Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author,” p.118.

²⁹ Shaftesbury, “Miscellany I,” p.5.

³⁰ *ibid*, p.3.

exposure to a marketplace atmosphere. Ideas could be strengthened or shown false from the experience of public exposure. In “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm,” Shaftesbury states,

Justness of thought and style, refinement in manners, good breeding and politeness of every kind can come only from the trial and experience of what is best. Let but the search go freely on, and the right measure of everything will soon be found.³²

One way to think of this is; not only does the philosopher require regular doses of social interaction, his ideas do as well. Historian Lawrence Klein explains:

In the decade that intervened between the initial publication of the *Inquiry* and its inclusion in *Characteristics*, it appears that Shaftesbury decided to shift the rhetorical grounds on which philosophy needed to fight its battles.³³

Third Earl of Shaftesbury is considered the father of what is known as the ‘Culture of Politeness.’³⁴ An example of the phenomenon of sociability is seen in Shaftesbury’s statement quoted above, where not only accuracy or “justness of thought” is desired, but also a “right measure” of “refinement and manners.” ‘Polite’ public interchange smoothed down the roughest edges of hostility and allowed for communication to take place without uncontrolled volatility, which has the tendency to cut off discussion. Polite idea exchange allowed for serious and volatile topics to be discussed effectively, i.e., sociably. In the wake of intense religious hostility and

³¹ Lawrence Klein, “Introduction,” *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989), p.vii.

³² Shaftesbury, “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to My Lord,” p.7-8.

³³ Lawrence Klein, “Introduction,” *Characteristics of Men Manners Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), p.ix.

warfare, the eighteenth-century community of print culture feared zealotry and enthusiasm.

In Shaftesbury's conception, sociability is also an essential component in human moral development. He explains,

...all social Love, Friendship, Gratitude, or whatever else is of this generous kind, does by its nature take place of the self-interesting Passions, draws us out of ourselves, and makes us disregarding of our own convenience and Safety.

David Hume built upon this significant element in Shaftesbury's philosophical project. Eighteenth-century Scots intellectuals, in particular, appreciated Shaftesbury and his notions of morality's reliance on natural affection. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb explains that it was Shaftesbury "who gave currency to the terms that became key concepts in British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the century- 'social virtues,' 'social affections,' 'natural affections,' 'moral sense,' 'moral sentiments,' 'fellow feeling,' 'benevolence,' 'sympathy,' and 'compassion.'"³⁵ Shaftesbury was looking for ethical and moral standards for people of differing religious beliefs to live together and function as a community. He removed religious doctrine from the standards for how humans treat and interact with each other, in all venues, not just politics. In its place he posited the existence of 'Natural Affection' as a universal element embedded within human nature that inclines humans toward harmonious relationships in society.

³⁴ For a full discussion of Shaftesbury's influence on the tenor of the century see Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1994.

³⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Idea of Compassion: The British vs. The French Enlightenment," Elie Kouderie Lecture, British Academy, London, May, 2001.

Sociability as a concept works on at least three levels. In the above discussion we have seen its presence in the attempt to simulate conversation via the essay format. We have also seen it as an essential component of human nature that serves two purposes. It helps form the whole person by inclining individuals toward society where they develop their sense of self, character, and their moral compass. Sociability also acts as a kind of restorative that is designed to keep the person whole and balanced by guarding him from extremes in life and thought. Sociability, then, encompassed an entire worldview that became very influential in the eighteenth-century. The wise in society, so the belief was, were sensitive to their social needs and understood the importance of a sociable temperament.

Not all eighteenth-century intellectuals were inclined to so positive a view of human sociability. Bernard Mandeville published his famous, or notorious, *Fable of the Bees*, in 1712, seemingly as a direct challenge the Earl. The book argues that all interest is in fact self-interest and that there really is no such essential human element as natural affection or sympathy. To the extent that natural affection exists in contemporary society it is because powerful members of the society have used those sentiments to manipulate others. In other words, the *idea* that natural affection is embedded in human nature is advantageous to those in society who want to exercise power over others. A person who believes in natural affection is pliable and obedient.³⁶ Mandeville wrote of Shaftesbury, “he fancies that as man is made for society, so he ought to be born with a kind of

³⁶ For a discussion of this aspect of Mandeville’s thought see Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p.119-121 and Margaret C. Jacob, “The Mental landscape of the Public Sphere: A European Perspective,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, vol.28, no.1, (Autumn, 1994), p.104.

affection to the whole of which he is a part and a propensity to seek the welfare of it.”³⁷

Mandeville praised self-interest and criticized as false and hypocritical the contemporary gospel of sympathy.

The *Fable of the Bees* generated huge controversy in Britain and compelled intellectuals to develop their own thoughts on the subject of natural affection versus egoism thoroughly and philosophically. Many of the most well known English and Scottish thinkers of the eighteenth century remained inclined towards Shaftesbury’s conception of human nature. Frances Hutcheson, Bishop Butler, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith all, with individual nuance, assumed humans to be social, and therefore, concerned on some fundamental level with understanding and relating to other human beings. Sociability is the grease that allows society to function.

David Hume participated in an intellectual atmosphere teeming with discussions about the roles played by natural affection and sympathy in the development of everything from society’s moral standards to its economic and political institutions. Some well-known titles published during this period (that lasted most of the century) include *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations of the Moral Sense* (1728), by Frances Hutcheson and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) by Adam Smith. Hutcheson, as teacher, and Smith as friend, heavily influenced Hume’s thought. In one of many letters to Hutcheson, Hume wrote, “Morality, according to your Opinion, as well as mine, is determin’d merely by Sentiment, it regards only Human Nature and human life.”³⁸ Hume’s (as well as Shaftesbury’s) position was

³⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, “The Idea of Compassion: The British vs. The French Enlightenment,” Elie Kouderie Lecture, British Academy, London, May, 2001.

³⁸ David Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, March 1740, p.34.

offensive to some who believed the project of finding a secular basis for morality to be an assertion of Libertinism. In fact, despite Frances Hutcheson's generosity towards David Hume, (active and thoughtful correspondence and willingness to read Hume's manuscripts) he is responsible for blocking Hume's appointment to chair the Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy Department at Edinburgh University in 1744 because of the religion issue.³⁹ Yet, in Scotland, especially, it was the moderate Protestant clergy who promoted the view that deep within human nature resides the universal ability to feel affection for other humans.

Scotland is distinct in the Enlightenment because of the open communication and cooperation between the landed elite, clerical leaders, university professors, and educated professionals.⁴⁰ No better evidence of this is the life of David Hume himself. The man who made no secret of his hostility toward organized religion and basic tenets of Christian belief remained on cordial terms, and often formed long term friendships with members of Scotland's leading clergy. The desire for community to run smoothly and peaceably did not derive from a particular religious view. Hume himself defined the belief by stating,

There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for humankind, some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent.⁴¹

³⁹ Mossner, p.157.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Phillipson, "The Scottish Enlightenment," eds. Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp.32-34. Also Mossner.

⁴¹Himmelfarb lecture

The *Spectator* and the marketplace of patrons

The eighteenth century saw the development of multiple communities or cultures of readers. They may be called ‘target audiences’ and they had particular expectations of the authors who addressed them. Authors, with the aid of their publishers entered into a kind of relationship with them. To be clear, I do not mean a personal or intimate relationship. Writers usually do not actually know the people reading their work.

David Hume once stated, “Fine writing, according to Addison, consists of sentiments, which are natural without being obvious. There cannot be a juster and more concise definition of fine writing.”⁴² Joseph Addison was the publisher and one of the primary writers of the periodical *The Spectator* (1711-1714). *The Spectator* once wrote

When I make a Choice of a Subject that has not been treated by others, I throw together my Reflections on it without any Order or Method, so that they may appear rather in the Looseness and Freedom of an Essay, than in the Regularity of a Set discourse.”⁴³

Like a fluid conversation.

Historian Scott Black argues that the *Spectator* was “written at the convergence of three early-modern phenomena: a new use of print technology, a new literary form, and a new social space...”⁴⁴ The fact that its essay format, style, and even its content were immediately copied in hundreds of journals throughout Europe and America helps

⁴² David Hume, “Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing,” *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, p.191.

⁴³ Scott Black, “Social and Literary form in the *Spectator*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol.33, no.1, (1999) p.26.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.21

illustrate the conditions that shaped David Hume's efforts.⁴⁵ The rapid commercialization of the publishing industry enabled Hume to imagine making a living independent of the traditional patronage system. For Hume, the *Spectator* serves as a model of what was possible in the world of print, because it targeted a particular audience, similar to the one Hume envisioned, and was very successful.

In the autobiographical essay "My Own Life," Hume makes it very clear, that the traditional patronage system of being supported by an aristocratic sponsor held no appeal. In his autobiography he states,

I resolved to make a very rigid frugality supply my deficiency of fortune, to maintain unimpaired my independency, and to regard every object as contemptible, except the improvement of my talents in literature.⁴⁶

Financial independence, due to his desire to remain intellectually independent, may have been the most important motivating factor in Hume's decision to turn from the formal presentation of the philosophical treatise to the essay format, made popular by the *Spectator*. The expanding commercial culture created new forms of patronage that were not limited to 'the great' or the state. As a consequence the print industry became a vibrant commercial enterprise throughout Western Europe. Its growth was steadily dramatic throughout the century. As one historian states it, by 1800 literacy...

...was central to economic, social, and cultural life in northwestern Europe. It had become an integral part of the bourgeois and elite sociability that was a keynote of the Enlightenment.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *The Spectator Project: A Hypermedia Research Archive of Eighteenth-Century Periodicals*, <http://tabula.rutgers.edu/spectator/project.html>

⁴⁶ "My Own Life," p. xxxiv.

⁴⁷ "Literacy," ed. in chief Alan Kors, *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, NY, 2003) "Literacy," Vol.2, pp.413-417

The British readership of the eighteenth-century included clergy, business people, and women along with aristocrats and governmental figures. Historian Terry Ballenger explains,

Once royalties were established, the way was paved for the development of an independent, professional class of writers, and though royalty payments did not become common in the eighteenth century, the mechanisms were all in place by the 1770's and one sees the joint emergence of the recognizably modern writer and publisher by the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

David Hume's career stands at the forefront of that phenomenon.

In Scotland in 1700, approximately 45% of the population could read. By late in the century that number reached nearly 85%.⁴⁹ In France, the volume of books produced tripled between 1700 and 1770 (That, under the auspices of a tightly controlled censorship system). In Germany, there were approximately 750 new books published per year in the 1740's. By the 1780's that number was up to about 5000 new titles per year.⁵⁰ The concept of 'patron' changed dramatically and publishers became marketers.

Historian Jeremy Popkin explains,

The books sold thanks to these new practices of commercialization were not necessarily related to the Enlightenment, but the interest in reading and the enlargement of the potential audience for printed works that these tactics promoted served the philosophers' purposes.⁵¹

⁴⁸Terry Ballenger, "Publishers and Writers in Eighteenth-Century England," ed. Isabel Rivers, *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Leicester University Press, NY, 1982), p.22.

⁴⁹ Himmelfarb lecture

⁵⁰Jeremy D. Popkin, "Publishing," ed. Alan Kors, *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, pp.372-378.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.375.

The new patronage system was not without its challenges, however. Historian James Fieser quotes eighteenth-century writer Thomas Cowper complaining,

All these [watchmakers, carpenters, bakers] read the Monthly Review and all these will set me down for a dunce, if those terrible critics show them the example. But oh! Wherever else I am accounted dull, dear Mr. Griffiths, let me pass for a genius at Olney!"⁵²

The quote reveals much. There is the fear that either the writer is “dumbing down” his thoughts or that his peers will see his performance as such. We will see, in the analysis below, how Hume spent a great deal of energy preserving his position as philosopher amidst his reading public. It is also apparent from the statement that Cowper is unsure exactly who his audience is. Is he writing for the watchmakers and carpenters or the critics? David Hume’s gift is that he clearly identified his target audience. Instead of just throwing his essays out into the vast impersonal marketplace, he had a specific audience in mind. He saw himself both as representative and able spokesman for a particular culture within society.

Hume creates an identity

David Hume writes in the opening statement of the section of the *Treatise* entitled, “Of personal identity,”

There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence

⁵² James Fieser, “The Eighteenth-Century British Reviews of Hume’s Writings,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol.57, no.4 (1996) p.647.

and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity.⁵³

Hume disagrees. He continues,

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.⁵⁴

This is Hume at his most skeptical. There is no self that can be comprehended as a static, independent entity. The self is always changing as it is constantly interacting with the world around it. In other words, the self cannot exist but in the state of extension, with constant input of perceptions. That belief implies that there is no such thing as a personal identity. For isn't an identity an entity that persists and is recognizable?

Consequently Hume then asks,

What then give us so great a propensity to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives?⁵⁵

Hume goes on to answer that question with his discussion of causation and the associative principle. The idea is that the mind takes in, using its senses, a huge quantity of data he terms impressions. It then turns those impressions into distinct images in the mind's eye. A crucial mechanism then kicks in. The mind strings and blends the distinct

⁵³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature Being An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), p. 164

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 164-165

images together via the principles of cause and effect and association. The result is that the mind presents to itself a vision of a coherent and stable object or identity. Hume calls this process ‘imagination.’ For example, because of experience and association, our mind allows us to go on assuming that the Tower of London remains standing, even though we may not be experiencing it via any of our senses at a given moment. ‘Imagination’ is Hume’s way of explaining common sense assumptions that do not hold up well under careful observation and reflection. This explanation showcases Hume at both his most skeptical and his slight retreat from that position to a level of skepticism he termed mitigated or academic skepticism.⁵⁶ He explains,

There is, indeed, a more *mitigated* skepticism or *academical* philosophy, which may be both durable and useful, and which may, in part, be the result of this Pyrrhonism, or *excessive* skepticism. When its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection.⁵⁷

What Hume articulates is that besides the uniquely human ability to reflect and ponder, there also exists a built-in ability to live and function confidently amid inconstancy. That, in fact, is what is meant by the concept of ‘Common Life-’ the idea that human beings go on living, feeling, making decisions and acting, even though the reflective mind cannot honestly be sure of any absolute purpose to human life. Hume alters the fundamental philosophical questions from those seeking ultimate knowledge to,

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.166.

⁵⁶ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec. XII, Part III, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), p.161.

⁵⁷ *ibid*.

“How DO humans go on, even though certainty is elusive?” Hume is a skeptic who recognizes human nature’s drive to live as though there is the stability of certainty.

In the *Abstract to the Treatise of Human Nature* Hume explains.

...we assent to our faculties and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy wou’d render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it.⁵⁸

My discussion of self and personal identity in Hume’s philosophy is intended to show where his philosophy and the thought contained in his *Essays* conjoin. There is no actual self, except the one the one we know by our common sense. It may be termed the mitigated or academical self (Hume’s terms). It is as if Hume is saying that whether or not there is a soul or spirit, or a self of some sort that maintains a constant identity over time, he will never know. Because he can never know, the self that functions in the here and now becomes the more philosophically relevant self for exploration. The academic self is crucial for understanding our politics, economics, relationships, morality, community and society- the stuff of lived experience.

I argue the academic self of Hume’s philosophy is a social entity. The most natural self that exists in time and space is a social being. I support my observation by the fact that Hume opens the second book of the *Treatise*, “Of the Passions” with a discussion of the self’s experience of pride and humility. Recall that Book I ended with the explanation of self and personal identity (that is, before the concluding essay). Neither the experience of pride nor humility can exist in a world without social relationships. The human self is social at its core. *Essays Moral Political and Literary*

ably represents Hume's philosophy of human nature, the analysis of selves in their social environment.

With the essay format, Hume develops a literary voice that simulates the sociable, mitigated, and common sense self. But there is a crucial added component: He is a philosopher. That means that he brings more to his work than commonsense observation. He brings the education, skill, and insight that allow him to mentally remove himself from day-to-day experience. That ability is what brought Hume to his radical skepticism. It also enables him to observe human nature with an eye toward the universal qualities of humanity. In other words, the literary voice Hume presents to his readers is a blend of the philosophical and the sociable. For him, that is the ideal voice of a Man of Letters.

Hume targets an audience

With his essay, "Of Essay Writing," published just once in his lifetime at the outset of what became a very successful and public career, Hume explains his intentions and methods.⁵⁹ "Of Essay Writing" is David Hume's statement of purpose. It answers the ultimate self-hood question, "Who am I and why am I here?" This is the story of

⁵⁸ David Hume in appendix of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, (Oxford University Press, Oxford), p.414

⁵⁹ David Hume, "Of Essay Writing," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. By Eugene F. Miller, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987) pp. 533-537. This essay, appeared only in vol.2 of Hume's collected essays, published in 1742 by Alexander Kincaid in Edinburgh. According to Hume scholars, including Eugene Miller, Donald Livingston, Jerome Christensen and, Ernest Campbell Mossner, Hume continuously edited 11 volumes of his collected works throughout his career, right up until his death. Most early essays remained in subsequent editions except for three, including this one. While Mossner claims "OF Essay Writing" to be trivial (page number), I contend that it is crucial to understanding Hume early in his career.

Hume asserting a personal identity into the world of print culture.

Hume connects his chosen rhetorical style to the art of conversation perfected by the women of French salon culture. In a letter to his friend Michael Ramsey in 1734, Hume writes of the character of the French and their language, “It polishes the bristles, allows for easy communication even if the conversation will go into substantive subjects.”⁶⁰ The mention of substantive subjects in that sentence is important. Hume sees a model for communicating challenging philosophical insights in an elegant style. At the time of this letter, he is still composing the *Treatise*. It is as if he tucked this observation about the French art of conversation away for later use.

We know he was thinking of Parisian salons because he mentions them at length in “Of Essay Writing.” The conversational world of the Parisian salon contributed to Hume’s identification of the various components of the reading public he addressed, namely the *Learned* and the *Conversable* worlds.

“Of Essay Writing” opens with the following statement...

The elegant Part of Mankind, who are not immers’d in the animal Life, but employ themselves in the Operations of the Mind, may be divided into the *learned* and *conversable*.⁶¹

What exactly does Hume mean as he employs the terms learned and conversable?

He explains...

The Learned are such as have chosen for their Portion the higher and more difficult Operations of the Mind, which require Leisure and Solitude, and

⁶⁰ Letters of David Hume, to Michael Ramsey, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1932), Letter #4, p.19-20.

⁶¹ David Hume, “Of Essay Writing,” p. 533.

cannot be brought to Perfection, without long Preparation and severe Labour.⁶²

And...

The conversible World join to a sociable Disposition, and a Taste for Pleasure, and Inclination to the easier and more gentle Exercise of the Understanding, to obvious Reflections on human Affairs, and the Duties of common Life, and to the Observation of the Blemishes or Perfections of the particular objects, that surround them.⁶³

One world is solitary. The other is sociable. To be learned requires strict discipline and austerity, whereas inclination and ease mark the conversible realm.

Hume observes the beginning of a “league” between elegant or conversational writing and serious intellectual endeavor. He asserts that the essay format is the precisely appropriate rhetorical mode for his time and his conversible audience.

‘Tis to be hop’d, that this League betwixt the learned and conversible worlds which is so happily begun, will be still farther improv’d to their mutual Advantage; and to that End, I know nothing more advantageous than such *Essays* as these with which I endeavor to entertain the Public. In this view, I cannot but consider myself as a kind of Resident or ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation; and shall think it my constant Duty to promote a good Correspondence betwixt the two States, which have so great a Dependence on each other.⁶⁴

The essay format, with its accessible style and public audience shows Hume exercising interpersonal, relational skills, skills he has come to appreciate for their necessity to a balanced human nature. However, when he re-entered the public arena after the disappointment of his Treatise, he did not leave the *learned* world of isolated

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 534.

⁶⁴ “Of Essay Writing,” p. 535.

reflection behind: he kept it with him. First and foremost, David Hume sees himself as a philosopher, a man who possesses the fortitude for intense intellectual labor, and he has the trauma of the birth experience of his *Treatise on Human Nature* to show for it.

In ‘My Own Life,’ Hume tells us...

I passed through the ordinary course of education with success, and was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments. My studious disposition, my sobriety, and my industry, gave my family a notion that the law was a proper profession for me; but I found an unsurmountable aversion to every thing but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning; and while they fancied I was poring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors which I was secretly devouring.⁶⁵

Hume clearly presents himself as merely traveling to the conversable world. His home is the world of learning. The following passage reinforces the point.

[I] shall endeavor to import into Company whatever Commodities I find in my native Country proper for their Use and Entertainment. The Balance of Trade we need not be jealous of, nor will there be any Difficulty to preserve it on both Sides. The Materials of this Commerce must chiefly be furnish'd by Conversation and common Life: The manufacturing of them alone belongs to Learning.⁶⁶

David Hume’s “native” country, the learned, is “alone” responsible for generating ideas, And he, Hume, tells the reader, and illustrates through his adept use of modern commercial lingo, that **he** has the unique ability to bring philosophy into the language of the reading public. The decision to become an essayist represents the desire to engage

⁶⁵ David Hume, “My Own Life,” in *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1985), p.xxxii-xxxiii. Hume composed this autobiographical essay in the weeks before his death in 1776, with instructions that it appear in all subsequent printings of his work.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, p. 535.

the public in terms more comfortable to it than that of a formal treatise, but he makes sure his philosophical self stands out clearly. This will become the basis for his claim to be representative or model in the community of print culture.

David Hume understood his chosen literary voice owed a great deal to the ‘elegant Part of **woman-kind**.’ As discussed above, it was the image of Parisian salon culture that helped him formulate his notion of the conversible world. Hume acknowledges women by stating...

As ‘twou’d be an unpardonable Negligence in an Ambassador not to pay his Respects to the Sovereign of the State where he is commision’d to reside; so it wou’d be altogether inexcusable in me not to address myself, with a particular respect, to the fair Sex, who are the Sovereigns of the Empire of Conversation.⁶⁷

The impression the young philosopher formed of France was that it was a world in which sociable, or conversible communication was elevated to an art form.

I am of Opinion, that women, that is, women of Sense and Education (for to such alone I address myself) are much better Judges of all polite Writing than men of the same degree of Understanding; and that 'tis a vain Pannic, if they be so far terrify'd with the common Ridicule that is levell'd against learned Ladies, as utterly to abandon every kind of Books and Study to our Sex. Let the Dread of that ridicule have no other Effect, than to make them conceal their knowledge before Fools, who are not worthy of it, nor of them.⁶⁸

To be clear, David Hume is not a feminist. Indeed, to many men in the eighteenth-century, the inclusion of women in the targeted audience may be seen as risky.

Condescending to women implied a retreat from rigorous intellectual performance. This

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 535

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 537.

was part of Shaftesbury's criticism of print commerce and the desire to gain a wide audience. It caused the writer to become somehow weak and effeminate. Notice that women are only fit to judge "polite writing." Hume is careful to preserve an authoritative image that is based on his identity as a member of the learned community. It is a fact, however, that in the eighteenth-century world of ideas-in-print, women enjoyed power. They formed a significant component of the marketplace of patrons. Hume astutely acknowledges the influence of a specific group of women, Parisian salonnières, by stating...

In a neighbouring Nation, equally famous for good Taste, and for Gallantry, the Ladies are, in a Manner, the Sovereigns of the *learned* World, as well as the *conversible*; and no polite Writer pretends to venture upon the Public, without the Approbation of some celebrated Judges of that Sex.⁶⁹

With that nod to women with power, Hume rapidly reasserts his own power by hinting at a potential problem. He adds...

...In particular, I find, that the Admirers of *Corneille*, to save that great Poet's honour upon the Ascendant that *Racine* began to take over him, always said, That it was not to be expected, that so old a Man could dispute the Prize, before such Judges, with so young a Man as his Rival.⁷⁰

Hume defends the judgment of the salonnières by pointing out the fact that *Racine's* status as a great literary talent never faltered, but a potential "female problem" is exposed. It is possible for judgments regarding literary form and content to become impaired by women's vulnerability to their more sensitive and impressionable nature. He

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 536.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

states as much, “As the Fair Sex have a great Share of the tender and amorous Disposition, it perverts their Judgment...and makes them be easily affected.”⁷¹

It is clear from the essay that women are not capable of the work of philosophy. Their dispositions are too sensitive and they are “unguided by Rules.” ...⁷² ‘Rules’ here signifies intellectual discipline and struggle, characteristics found in the world of the learned, not the conversable. David Hume addressed women directly and assumed them capable of understanding his essays and eventually his histories. That may have appeared a risky maneuver in the eighteenth-century. Nevertheless, he is intent on preserving his status of a learned man. The significance of women as a portion of Hume’s target audience lay specifically in that tension. If a woman is able to ponder his essays, which he intends to be philosophical in content, isn’t she then apt to think philosophically? Hume’s agenda appears to be the elevation of the conversable world toward that of the learned. Are conversable women only able to follow him to a limited extent? Or is Hume actually broadening the conception of who can be a philosopher? By asserting the conversable world can and should think philosophically, he may in fact be doing just that.⁷³

David Hume’s philosophy of human nature with its stress on the primary importance of lived experience (including conversable engagement with women!), allowed him to establish himself as a sage observer amongst the learned as well as the conversable. Hume explains the dilemma of the traditional philosopher...

⁷¹ *ibid*, p. 537.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 534.

⁷³ This is a subject I would like explore, but it is beyond the scope of this particular study.

What cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in Common Life and Conversation?⁷⁴

Hume's criticism of the philosophical community is harsh. "Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company," he scolds.⁷⁵ Hume is accusing philosophy of artificially detaching itself from life. He continues,

By that Means, every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation. Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study, and became chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery."⁷⁶

It is not surprising that the "Philosopher of Common Life" should find his stride as an essayist.⁷⁷ What is striking, though, is how intensely David Hume felt the need preserve the learned dimension of his identity. It is possible that Hume seriously doubted he could produce a great work of philosophy again, for reflective rigor tested his limits. Let us return to the letter to the doctor, composed while the young philosopher was working out the *Treatise*. Hume relates,

Here lay my greatest calamity. I had no hopes of delivering my opinions with such elegance and neatness, as to draw the attention of the world, and

⁷⁴ "Of Essay Writing," p. 535

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p. 534.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, p. 534-535.

⁷⁷ Donald Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London), 1984.

I would rather live and die in obscurity than produce them maimed and imperfect.⁷⁸

Long before Hume was concerned with portraying himself as a learned man in the conversible world in “Of Essay Writing,” he worried about his ability to maintain the mental commitment of philosophy itself. Hume wants to know if the doctor is aware of other scholars who have been “affected in this manner.” And will his recovery “ever be perfect, and my spirits regain their former spring and vigour, so as to endure the fatigue of deep and abstruse thinking?”⁷⁹ He wonders if he will have to give up philosophy as a profession, as his identity.

In the concluding thoughts to the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume describes the fatigue he is suffering from wrestling with difficult thoughts and their challenging implications. The philosopher has arrived at his skepticism (for which he is mainly known) and despairs,

Such a discovery not only cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes, since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without meaning.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p. 36. According to the first editor of David Hume’s letters, J.Y.T. Greig, almost no letters have ever surfaced for the crucial years of 1734-1737, the years immediately preceding the publication of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, a fact that underscores the idea that Hume was indeed quite isolated during that time.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p. 38

⁸⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature Being An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), Book I, Sec. 7, p.173.

This section in the *Treatise* reveals Hume's process of drawing the connections between isolation and abstraction, as well as, sound mental health and quality intellectual performance. In another passage, he confesses,

I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd of all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate.⁸¹

Hume pushes through the despair to what he terms his mitigated or academical skepticism. He is convinced that it is the human animal's social nature that restored his balance. He asks,

But does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries...

And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or of my own private interest? No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with.⁸²

Human nature, human *social* nature, calls the depressed philosopher back to 'common life.' That is the restorative aspect of sociability (described above) at work. The isolated scholar, estranged from community and focused on abstractions is, in a way, not living at all in Hume's estimation. Equally as significant is the idea that he is not actually

⁸¹ *ibid.* p.172

⁸² *ibid.* p.175

doing the work of philosophy, which is to observe and reflect on human life at its most natural.

This section of the *Treatise* is remarkable for its intimacy. While the content of the philosophy is focused on steering serious thought away from the abstract or metaphysical, Hume had to be somewhat obscure in communicating it thoroughly. *The Treatise of Human Nature* is dense and difficult to read. Yet, there are moments, as in this concluding section to Book I, when the page contains more than thoughts. The philosopher is a human being with all the cares and struggles that implies. The point here is to argue that the demarcation that Hume scholars have placed between the *Treatise* and his *Essays* over the past two centuries is perhaps not quite so bold as has been assumed. Even at that early point in his life and thought we glimpse the notion that for Hume, philosophy, personal life, and style of communication do, and should, mesh together.

I do not see Hume's disease of the learned and his discussion of it simply as that of a philosopher who could no longer perform the work of philosophy. What he did is lay the foundation for making real life the stuff of philosophical contemplation. This is a subject of debate in Hume studies. I am arguing that Hume's work as an essayist is indeed the work of philosophy, but many scholars have overlooked the *Essays* on this point, or believe them to be of a lighter, more trivial nature. Hume scholar, Carol Kay observes,

I find that present-day philosophers are much moved by the conclusion of *Treatise* book I- 'I am affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am placed by my philosophy'- and while they tend to respect the solution to skeptical impasses, a return to common life (including the game of backgammon), there is a tendency to read this part

of Hume as the prelude to his commonly alleged sell-out, his popularization of his writing.⁸³

A late nineteenth century scholar of Hume remarked about, “the suddenness with which his labours in philosophy came to an end.” He adds that after the *Treatise* Hume “certainly lacked the disposition, and probably the ability” to construct philosophy (after bringing it down with his skepticism).⁸⁴

Hume’s intention is to show that with the *Treatise of Human Nature*, what he got wrong was not the philosophy, but the style of presentation. With the essay format, form and content match. The essay, not the formal treatise, becomes the appropriate vehicle for communicating a philosophy founded on human nature and its key component, sociability. The learned portion of Hume’s audience stands to gain from his insights regarding the primary importance of lived experience. He wants to prevent them from being irrelevant. The conversable world is challenged to think on their lives and their world more philosophically. Although the *Essays* may be thought of as a popularization of Hume’s thought, due to their accessibility, he did not intend them for a widely popular audience. David Hume’s target audience was serious thinkers.

⁸³ Carol Kay, “Valuing Practices in Hume,” *New Literary History*, vol.30, no.4 (1999),p.764.

⁸⁴ T.H. Grose, from his preface to the *Essays Moral Political and Literary* in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, (New Edition; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889) quoted in Eugene F. Miller, “Foreword,” to Hume, David, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987), n. 18, p.xviii.

Society Expresses Itself in Politics, Economics, and Art

In the original *Treatise* Hume spells out his belief that all science is dependent on human nature, the operations of human understanding. He states, “ Even *Mathematics*, *Natural Philosophy*, and *Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependent on the science of Man; since they are under the cognizance of men, and are judg’d of by their powers and faculties.”⁸⁵ Indeed, his philosophy is often termed, the science of man. The four subjects, “*Logic, Morals, Criticism, and Politics*” are included in Hume’s list of “all science.” This is an important element in my argument that David Hume’s turn to the essay format is not sell out or mere popularization of his writing. He explains, in the following paragraph of the *Treatise*,

The sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty and the nature of our ideas: Morals and criticism regard our tastes and sentiments. And politics consider men as united in society and dependent on each other. In these four sciences of *Logic, Morals, Criticism*, and *Politics*, is comprehended almost every thing, which it can any way import to us to be acquainted with or which can tend to the improvement or ornament of the human mind.⁸⁶

The point here is that the Essay format simulates real life sociable communication. The material for Hume’s scientific study is real life society. The *Essays Moral Political and Literary* cover almost “everything which it can any way import to us...” The philosopher who believes that all knowledge and morality comes from experience and custom is compelled to focus his attention on the experience and customs of his own life and times.

⁸⁵ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, p.4

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

The most obvious proof of Hume's desire to make the contemporary world of lived experience the stuff of philosophical inquiry is the variety of subjects examined in the *Essays*. Hume states,

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. Where experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compar'd, we may hope to establish on them a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension.⁸⁷

There are thirty-nine pieces in the 1777 edition of *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Topics range from art criticism, political partisanship, and economics, to social mores.⁸⁸ Margaret Schabas studies David Hume, the Economist, and finds that Hume's style and content mimic the economic world in which he lives. She quotes Hume as stating "the world is designed such that its diverse soils, climates, and geniuses insure mutual intercourse and commerce."⁸⁹ The imagery in that quote portrays an interactive world, a vibrant social atmosphere. The vibrant, interactive, and commercial atmosphere of eighteenth-century social life threads itself throughout the collection of essays. The result is an interconnected whole that is a kind of science of society. In other words, studying any one particular aspect of society will provide insight into how other aspects operate. For example, Hume believes that the kind of government and economic life a community operates with, is reflected in its level of artistic and scientific achievement.

In "Of the Rise of Arts and Sciences," Hume writes,

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.6

⁸⁸ See Appendix I for contents

⁸⁹ Margaret Schabas, "David Hume on Experimental Natural Philosophy, Money, Fluids," *History of Political Economy*, vol.33, no.3 (2001) p.412.

My first observation on this head is, *that it is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, at first, among any people, unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government.*⁹⁰

His second observation is...

*That nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy.*⁹¹

Although they are not strictly organized along these lines, the *Essays Moral Political and Literary* is presented in two Parts, one mainly focused on government and politics, the other on economic life and policy. Hume is always concerned with recognizing what constitutes the best balance for a society. The common thread is process of aiming for balance. In this essay, he states this explicitly,

To balance a large state or society, whether monarchical or republican, on general laws, is a work of so great difficulty, that no human genius, however comprehensive, is able, by the mere dint of reason and reflection, to effect it. The judgments of many must unite in this work: Experience must guide their labour: Time must bring it to perfection: And the feeling of inconveniences must correct the mistakes, which they inevitably fall into, in their first trials and experiments.⁹²

What I am seeing in Hume's thought, is that the scientific method applied to the study of human nature is not merely a means to discover how individuals and societies function, but a way of life, for both individuals and societies. Life is a process of trial and error, of experience and contemplating that experience. In this way, Hume's *Essays* exhibit a kind of historical approach. The task of the philosopher is to analyze that experience and compare it over time, as well as across cultures. Hume states.

⁹⁰ "Of the Rise of Arts and Sciences," p.115.

⁹¹ *ibid*, p.119

I must add, that history is not only a valuable part of knowledge, but opens the door to many other parts, and affords materials to most of the sciences. And indeed, if we consider the shortness of human life, and our limited knowledge, even of what passes in our own time, we must be sensible that we should be for ever children in understanding, were it not for this invention, which extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most distant nations; making them contribute as much to our improvement in wisdom, as if they had actually lain under our observation. A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continuing additions to his stock of knowledge in every century.⁹³

The study of history, for Hume, is the study of societies- how they develop and what causes their rise or decline. This is why David Hume's philosophy is a science of society. The community, or state, is his point of reference. His conception of the individual is dependent on that individual's social engagement (sociability as an essential element in human nature), and he conceives of the world as a collection of societies interacting with each other. At the hub of Hume's thought is the social entity.

Hume is particularly concerned with the developmental process of British society. With regards to government, economics, arts and sciences, Hume does not find too much at fault with his contemporary Britain. It seems to have achieved as close to a perfect balance as can be expected. There is the mixed government of the Monarchy and Parliament. There is also the dynamic and international commercial economy that compels his society to compare itself to other societies and adjust as needed. For example, in "Of the Rise of Arts and Sciences," Hume compares the lasting impact of Descartes from France and Newton from Britain. He explains,

What checked the progress of the CARTESIAN philosophy, to which the FRENCH nation shewed such a strong propensity towards the end of the

⁹² *ibid*, p.124

⁹³ "Of the Study of History," p.567.

last century, but the opposition made to it by the other nations of EUROPE, who soon discovered the weak sides of that philosophy?

He then continues,

The severest scrutiny, which NEWTON'S theory has undergone, proceeded not from his own countrymen, but from foreigners; and if it can overcome the obstacles, which it meets with at present in all parts of EUROPE, it will probably go down triumphant to the latest posterity.⁹⁴

Hume is drawing a connection between France's absolutist monarchy and a kind of weakness he perceives in France's epistemological practices, generally.⁹⁵ In Hume's conception, this is not unlike the individual philosopher, discussed above, who traps himself in irrelevant abstractions. France is not an appropriately sociable entity in the world.

“Of the Standard of Taste” and the Emergence of Social Identity

Individual people are plugged into webs of understandings- language, meanings, manners, customs, and history, i.e., each person is a member of a community. In eighteenth-century Britain, the variety and quantity of webs- of -understanding appeared to be increasing. In other words, social life existed on many levels-family, town, region (i.e. Scotland), religious affiliation, political identification, and state (what we may think of as nation). The active print media of the eighteenth-century that portrayed so many facets of life, helped create a situation where the diversity in society became more plainly evident. A person may spend her whole life in and amongst her own specific social group within society, but still become acquainted via print with other social groups that

⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.121-122.

⁹⁵ This is a rather sweeping generalization. Nevertheless, I do believe Hume is drawing character distinctions between British and French societies in this passage

have different ways of doing things. Consequently, she would have the sense of living in a diverse place.

Hume characterizes the atmosphere with this passage from his *Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals*...

The more we converse with mankind, and the greater the social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other... Besides, that we ourselves often change our situation in this particular, we every day meet with persons who are in a situation different from us, and who could never converse with us were we to remain constantly in that position and point of view, which is peculiar to ourselves. The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners.⁹⁶

In this one paragraph, Hume describes the process by which each individual feels connected to a particular community, but also how each individual encounters plurality within society.

Hume observes that human societies desire formal standards for beauty, conduct, and morality. That desire is a result of the experience of diversity. Those standards can be preservative of a particular group within the larger society, or come about in the attempt to draw various groups together. Either way, standards become the benchmarks of identity for those societies. Hume is laying out a kind of sociological explanation the creation of a community-consciousness. The community asserts its identity by defining its values. The essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" (1758) may be interpreted as a description of how the conversable segment of the print culture of eighteenth-century Britain,

⁹⁶ Hume, David, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, quoted in Carol Kay, "Valuing Practices in Hume," *New Literary History*, vol.30, no.4 (1999). pp.758-759.

particularly that portion that had a taste for learning, created its identity, or at least how David Hume interpreted that community's response to the question, "Who are we and why are we here?"

Hume believes,

It is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.⁹⁷

A careful look at this passage from the essay "Of the Standard of Taste," reveals the challenge of a complex society: for the effort to find *a* standard may be futile. Not completely confident that a standard can be found, Hume is willing to "at least" come to a decision. He explains,

The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under everyone's observation. Men of the most confined knowledge are able to remark a difference of taste in the narrow circle of their acquaintance, even where the persons have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices.⁹⁸

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Hume states the notion as, "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty."⁹⁹ Ostensibly, Hume is discussing art in "Of the Standard of Taste." But like Shaftesbury before him, Hume believes that moral virtue and aesthetic beauty are interrelated. Beauty is beauty, whether it is exhibited in a

⁹⁷ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," p.229.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.226.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.230.

person's behavior or on canvas. "Of the Standard of Taste" may be read as Hume's thinking on the subject of how societies form their moral values. He continues,

One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.¹⁰⁰

There is no absolute standard of taste-no absolute truth. But Hume does not leave moral standards to a chaotic relativism. Tension exists between the desire for the community to lay down standards and the notion that absolute standards are unattainable. This discussion is an example of the functional quality of the mitigated skeptic operating on the level of community. Communities need to produce solid moral foundations on which to function just as the self needs to make its world cohesive and livable. Just as there is human nature, with its imaginative faculties that allow for the individual to operate sure-footedly in the world, there is a societal nature, with mechanisms that allow societies to function while embodying diversity. Societies come to agreed upon standards, in spite of their elusive nature. Hume articulates the challenge,

It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided.¹⁰¹

Literary historian Carol Kay interprets Hume as saying that sympathy is what motivates people to want to try to establish standards for artistic taste or social behavior-

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," p.244.

people want to work together.¹⁰² I agree, but I believe Hume is saying more. The philosophical, or perhaps, sociological question Hume is positing, is, how do societies, especially diverse urban ones, function as a unit? People also want, or need, to feel secure in their lives and choices, while aware of the great variety of opinion. A *standard* is an agreed upon guideline, or debated about signpost, that aids the community in the creation of its identity. That identity, that sense of itself, gives the community the confidence that comes with the sense of coherence.

How does the society find that signpost or guideline around which to base its standards? If beauty is in the eye of the beholder on what basis can an individual claim authority?

Hume asks,

But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from pretenders? These questions are embarrassing and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty, from which, during the course of this essay, we have endeavored to extricate ourselves.¹⁰³

First of all, the valued critic must possess a keen sensibility. Hume writes,

Though men of delicate taste be rare, they are easily to be distinguished in society by the soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind.¹⁰⁴

Hume speaks of the art of criticism as dependent upon a kind of perceptual health and acuity. A finer delicacy of taste, or sentiment allows for more of an “objects’ parts which are fitted to please.” He adds, “It is acknowledged to be perfection of every

¹⁰² Carol Kay, 763.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, p.241.

sense or faculty, to perceive with exactness its most minute objects, and allow nothing to escape its notice and observation.”¹⁰⁵ I think of this as a kind of high-definition resolution. The abler critic does not necessarily see more, but he sees it more acutely, with more of the object’s nuance and detail. Here are two more passages that enforce the point...

...a quick and acute perception of beauty or deformity must be the perfection of our mental taste; nor can a man be satisfied with himself while he suspects, that any excellence or blemish in a discourse has passed him unobserved. In this case, the perfection of the man, and the perfection of the sense or feeling, are found to be united.¹⁰⁶

Also,

The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature: Where men vary in their judgments, some defect or perversion in the faculties may commonly be remarked; proceeding either from prejudice, from want of practice, or want of delicacy...¹⁰⁷

It is crucial not to underestimate the importance of a healthy sensibility in Hume’s thought. The first essay in Hume’s collection, which remained first in all of the meticulously edited subsequent editions, is “Of the Delicacy of Taste.” What is Hume saying by placing “Of the Delicacy of Taste” in the position of introduction? As with “Of Essay Writing” and “Of the Standard of Taste” Hume is describing the voice of authority best able to represent his community. Hume draws a distinction between a “delicacy of taste” and a “delicacy of passion.” Both, he states, “enlarge the sphere of both our happiness and misery, and make us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.243.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, p.236.

¹⁰⁶ “Of the Standard of Taste,” p.236.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, p.243.

the rest of mankind.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, a delicacy of passion is to be “lamented” while the delicacy of taste is cultivated. Hume writes,

I am persuaded, that nothing is so proper to cure us of this delicacy of passion, as the cultivating of that higher and more refined taste, which enables us to judge of the characters of men, of compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts.¹⁰⁹

He continues ...

A greater or less relish for those obvious beauties, which strike the senses, depends entirely upon the greater or less sensibility of the temper.¹¹⁰

It takes a very special person, one with the proper degree of sensibility to perform the task of moral criticism. Hume says that experience and practice can improve a would-be critic’s “delicacy of taste,” as if anyone can achieve it. This appears democratic on its face. But Hume does **not** mean that just anyone can do it. The skilled philosopher makes the best judge. He explains,

In order to judge aright of a composition of genius, there are so many views to be taken in, so many circumstances to be compared, and such knowledge of human nature requisite, that no man, who is not possessed of the soundest judgment, will ever make a tolerable critic in such performances.¹¹¹

The critic, then, is a philosopher, in the mode Hume endorses: he knows human nature. The philosopher/critic is also able to comprehend the various particulars of taste, virtue, and beauty valued in any community or era from which the observed work emerged. Hume continues.

¹⁰⁸ “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion,” p.5.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, p.6

¹¹⁰ *ibid*.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p.6.

A critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse, must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration. In like manner, when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances.¹¹²

Literary historian Carol Kay argues that Hume's aim is to evaluate art (or politics, or economics, or ethics, or morals) without prejudice, but remain a member of his own community-consciously.¹¹³ Hume does appear to advocate a kind of mental acrobatics in judging artistic performance. The gifted authority on art and ethics is sensible to his particular cultural meanings. His perception, and therefore, his judgments about his contemporary life and times is acute and of high quality. But the skilled critic is also able to apply his keen sensibility to the context from which and for which the work of art (or ethical norm) under observation derives. In other words, he must come from the learned segment of society.

Hume describes such a person,

One accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the production of genius.¹¹⁴

There is so much riding on a very special person with a rarified sensibility.

He continues,

Thus, though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of

¹¹² "Of the Standard of Taste", p.239.

¹¹³ Carol Kay, "Valuing Practices in Hume," *New Literary History*, vol.30, no.4 (1999), pp.757-767.

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, p.238.

art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles.¹¹⁵

The best than can be hoped for is to arrive, “at least” to a “decision.”

It is hard to imagine that Hume actually believes there could ever be discovered *a* standard of taste. Again, we are seeing the mindset of the mitigated skeptic. Because an absolute standard cannot be discovered, the wise person trusts in the process of human nature, the tendency of social entities to eventually arrive at agreed upon consensus. It is the critic’s role to articulate that consensus.

Along with a keen sensibility, the able critic needs to appear impartial. Hume states,

To be above the Temptation of Interest is a Species of Virtue, which we do not find by Experience to be very common...¹¹⁶

The rhetorical pose of impartiality was a key component of Hume’s literary voice and an important aspect his personal identity. I believe, however, that there is more to his notion of impartiality than the attempt to be fair. Hume’s ideal of impartiality has its roots in the two major themes of his philosophy, skepticism and sociability. Skepticism, which by definition claims there are no absolute truths, is another way of saying “No one is absolutely right.” Therefore, to come down absolutely on one side or another of any issue raises the very real potential for an error in judgment. Sociability implies an atmosphere in which communication is open and flowing. Human social nature’s process

¹¹⁵ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” p.241.

¹¹⁶ David Hume, quoted in Ernest Campbell Mossner, p.306, from the preface to Hume’s *History of England*.

of finding consensus and balance is not hamstrung by entrenched positions. The impartial observer, in this sense, is a friend to all. Hume describes the process,

...when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances.¹¹⁷

Hume's ability to present many sides to an issue was a source of pride for him. I am not saying that he actually achieved impartiality, or necessarily believed he could. Notice, he says he must depart from his present situation, "if possible." The point is he had confidence in his skill in presenting topics under discussion in a complete manner. That ability stems from his conception of human nature, his philosophy. The truth or the nearest the human mind can approach it, lies at a balanced point in between polarized positions. The process of aiming toward that truth involves ongoing experience and reflection on that experience. The thought process that led Hume to his radical skepticism, from which human nature snapped him back to a functional level of skepticism, is the same skepticism that cannot buy any ideological line. Political Scientist Scott Yenor explains, "Hume takes the inability to answer certain metaphysical questions to be a counsel for moderation, not a license for liberal partisanship or for dedication to a utopian politics."¹¹⁸ In other words, the thinker is wise to concentrate his perceptive and reflective abilities on contemporary politics, culture, and society, as we find them. With

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.239.

¹¹⁸ Scott Yenor, "Between Rationalism and Postmodernism: Hume's Political Science of our 'Mixed Kind of Life,'" *Political Research Quarterly*, vol.55, no.2, (June, 2002) p.347.

that proper understanding of human nature, David Hume put into words his philosophical program that entails a mitigated skepticism applied to common life.

Most of the essays in *Essays Moral Political and Literary* display this balancing process approach to issues. The effect is a tone of impartiality. For example, Hume opens up his discussion in “Of the Refinement of the Arts,” (1752) with this sentence...

LUXURY is a word of uncertain signification, and may be taken in a good as well as in a bad sense.¹¹⁹

Hume is responding to contemporary debate deriving, in part, from the dramatic expansion of commercial and consumer culture in Britain at the time. He goes on to articulate the extreme poles of the debate ...

Since luxury may be considered either as innocent or blameable, one may be surprised at those preposterous opinions, which have been entertained concerning it; while men of libertine principles bestow praises even on vicious luxury, and represent it as highly advantageous to society; and on the other hand, men of severe morals blame even the most innocent luxury, and represent it as the source of all the corruptions, disorders, and factions, incident to civil government. We shall here endeavor to correct both these extremes, by proving, *first*, that the ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous; *secondly*, that wherever luxury ceases to be innocent, it also ceases to be beneficial; and when carried to a degree too far, is a quality pernicious, though perhaps not the most pernicious, to political society.¹²⁰

Hume took particular pride in his ability to strike an impartial stance with regard to politics. In a letter to Madame de Boufflers, the elegant and learned French woman whom historians believe Hume fell in love with, Hume writes,

¹¹⁹ “Of Refinement in the Arts,” p.268.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p.269.

I have the satisfaction to find that my performance has alternately given displeasure to both parties...I shall always regard the anger of both as the surest warrant of my impartiality.”¹²¹

Despite praise from some corners, a significant element in the historical context of David Hume’s career is the fact that he was widely condemned for his religious skepticism. Hume’s religious views prevented him from becoming a professor of philosophy at the University in Edinburgh. Even his friend, Adam Smith, had reservations about handling the publication his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) for Hume after his death, due to the controversy they would generate.¹²² Nevertheless, it was crucial that Hume maintain the rhetorical posture of a reasonable observer who had the skill to remove himself from prejudice. It was very important to him that all sides of the debate were presented sincerely and respectfully. In a letter to his friend Gilbert Elliot of Minto, written while he was working on the Dialogs, Hume stated:

I have often thought that the best way of composing a Dialogue, wou’d be for two Persons that are of different Opinions about any question of Importance, to write alternately the different Parts of the Discourse, and reply to each other. By this means, that vulgar Error would be avoided, of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the Adversary: And at the same time a Variety of Character & Genius being upheld, would make the whole look more natural & unaffected¹²³

¹²¹ Ibid. Historian James Fieser reports that based on his examination of contemporary Whiggish and Tory-leaning Reviews and Journals, Hume’s Essays were highly praised in both. Fieser, James, “The Eighteenth-Century British Reviews of Hume’s Writings,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol.57, no.4 (1996) pp.645-657.

¹²² Smith refused, therefore Hume entrusted their publication with his publisher William Strahan, in a codicil to his will, that they be released within two years of his death. Mossner, p.592.

¹²³ David Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, Letter #72, March 1751, p.154.

Although a devoutly religious individual may view Hume's religious skepticism as radically unorthodox, he was actually pragmatic. An impartiality that strives to render all positions credible serves the purpose of a society that wants to keep things moving and get things done. It smoothes out the bumps in the road. It is an optimistic belief that if one understands his views to be taken seriously, he is more apt to participate in working out compromise and consensus. Hume's system, then, serves as a recipe for toleration in society. As mentioned in the introduction, eighteenth-century Britain lived in the wake of intense religious violence. David Hume was one of many who offered strategies for navigating the, often volatile, public atmosphere. He believed that lay at the heart of what his target audience expected of him, guidance to live peaceably amidst diversity, and a way to keep business and life moving.

Conclusion

The sense of relationship and intimacy conveyed in the modern essay form is perfectly suited to the culture of politeness that marks Britain in the time of David Hume. Readers could feel an affinity with the 'polite gentleman' who composed the work. The expanding print culture allowed for that intimate, conversational tone to be experienced by people who never met in person. David Hume tapped into a literary form that fostered the experience of human sociability, but did not require intimate contact. As a consequence, we can imagine a *readership* developing a cultural identity.

Hume believed his target audience valued sociability, not merely reflected in conversation or the written word, but as a basis for understanding the fundamental workings of their world. This is how the *Essays Moral Political and Literary* manage to

weave together form, content, and historical context. The belief that sociability is a mechanism embedded in human nature leads to the notion that the contemplation of humans in their communal life is worthy of philosophical attention. That notion, then, leads to the multi-variant topics of the *Essays* and the art of philosophical living they set forth. Hume's philosophy of human nature is a process, a way of living, not an end or an answer to fundamental questions. With the turn to the essay format, Hume broadens the concept of who can actually lead a philosophical life.

The most striking characteristic of this specific culture is its optimism, its positive take on sociability. In the *Essays* Hume never explicitly discusses the causes of crime, violence, and war, other than to state generally that the tenacious adherence to extreme, unrealistic beliefs fosters society's tensions. What about the darker side of human nature? David Hume's audience views itself as full of positive possibilities for its culture and institutions. Sociability was the key to make it work.

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