

## NATURE AND ARTIFICE IN HUME'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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### Introduction

Early modern preoccupation with nature raises artifice into an object of philosophical concern as well. Literally and metaphorically both terms' meanings achieve a wide extension. All invention is artifice. In the argument from design, for example, the deity itself is an artificer, and its creation – nature – may be said, in a way, to be artificial. In the human domain, if compared to nature, artifice constitutes a problem, when it diverts life from its right course, or a solution, when it rescues humankind from ills and disorders, physical and mental. So as to better govern men, Mandevillean politicians and educators contrive the artificial distinction between vice and virtue, and thus produce the sense of shame and honor. In Mandeville's infamous words: "moral virtues are the offspring which flattery begot upon pride." By means of an artifice, Hobbesian individuals escape a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" life in the state of nature, while for Rousseau social artifices are impediments to natural freedom and self-determination. In the sphere of knowledge, the Cartesian evil demon represents a methodological artifice that prevents the pursuer of metaphysical truth from falling prey to error. Thus, positively marked, artifice secures peace, enables action, and assists thinking. When negative, it creates the illusion of reality, or simply obscures reality altogether.

Understandably, the vast scholarly tradition concerning Hume's concept of artifice centers on the social virtue of justice. At times, scholars attribute a more comprehensive scope to artifice: John Mackie considers that Hume's treatment of the so called natural virtues would improve from "a partial breaking down" of the distinction between them and the artificial virtues. In his view, the former virtues,

much like the latter, counteract selfishness and confined generosity. Moreover, they too are valued impartially, interpersonally, and as a system, both on psychological and sociological grounds. At the least, systematizing is, according to him, an artificial aspect of the natural virtues.<sup>1</sup> Miguel Badía-Cabrera, in presenting a solution to the much disputed question of the natural character of religion, argues, against the disputants' shared "identification of instinctive and natural", that, while religion does not begin in an original instinct, it is, nonetheless, natural. The case, he notes, resembles that of justice, and adds that: "for Hume the question is a dispute of words which only arises due to the ambiguity of the word 'natural'. In a broad sense justice [like religion] is natural because it is the outcome of the operation of several constitutive principles of human nature."<sup>2</sup> Tito Magri claims that viewing rationality as an artificial capacity can help to solve the apparent paradoxes of reason in the *Treatise*.<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, upon enquiring on how the Humean 'mind' becomes 'subject', concludes that for Hume subjectivity consists in belief, anticipation, and invention. Deleuze regards the subjective mind, together with the entire objective world, a fiction and artifice of the imagination.<sup>4</sup>

This paper partially agrees with such interpreters in arguing that Hume draws anew the conceptual map of his time by both delivering 'artifice' from negative connotations, and integrating artifice to nature. As I intend to show, in so doing, Hume detects artifice not only in moral virtues, but also in social and political relations, as well as in theoretical and literary compositions. After him, or, at least, with him, the dichotomy between nature and artifice can no longer be central to the modern debate. One of the original results of this 'Humean moment' is the strengthening of the concepts of "experience" and "common life".

Hence, in this essay, I propose to approach Hume's text by asking the question: in morals, what does 'artifice' mean for Hume? And, conversely, what is the meaning of 'nature' for him? In an attempt to outline the limits he assigns to artifice in morals, I intend to show that they are not rigid, or rather not until Hume comes across what he denominates "artificial lives" in "A Dialogue" appended to the second *Enquiry*. When it comes to such lives, from positive, neutral, or am-

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<sup>1</sup> John L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Miguel A. Badía-Cabrera, *Hume's Reflection on Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 78-9.

<sup>3</sup> Tito Magri, "The Evolution of Reason in Hume's *Treatise*," *Philosophical Forum* 25.4 (1994): 310-32.

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

bivalent, artifice becomes a purely negative notion. Why is this so? Why does Hume not extend his arguments on artifice and nature to them?

The reason, to my view, is that, in their many different ways, all these lives attempt a total diversion from natural propensities. The attempt makes them, ultimately, unable to sustain individual and social co-existence, and in extreme cases, even survival. In them alone, artifice frontally *contradicts* nature.<sup>5</sup> I conclude with the assertion that understanding Hume's concept of artifice helps to reveal the normative strength of two fundamental notions of his thought – the notions of “common life” and “experience”.

### Nature and artifice in thought – Nature and artifice in practice

Nature stands at the very core of Hume's program in the *Treatise*,<sup>6</sup> and ‘natural’ first denotes principles of the mind and behavior that operate uniformly. This is how nature comes to signify necessity for Hume. Strongly put: “uniformity forms the very essence of necessity” (T 2.3.1.10). In the analysis of pride, Hume draws the distinction between original and natural principles, thus discerning two orders of necessity: original or primary qualities “are such as are most inseparable from the soul, and can be resolv'd into no other behavior known to operate regularly and uniformly,” while a property of the mind is called natural “from the constancy and steadiness of its operations.”<sup>7</sup> Hence ‘nature’ comes to encompass an extensive ontological and epistemic segment, as well as some of the inner gradations of an even wider segment. Nonetheless, Hume also says of the word ‘nature’: it is that “than which there is none more ambiguous and equivocal”

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<sup>5</sup> All references are to: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, An Abstract of...A Treatise of Human Nature, A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, ed. David Fate Norton & Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Vol. 1, 2007), hereafter, T, Abs., L. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), hereafter, EHU. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), hereafter, EPM, “A Dialogue”. *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), hereafter, *Essays*. *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter NHR. *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 Vols, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), hereafter, *Letters*.

<sup>6</sup> As we know, Newton's natural philosophy is the model of Hume's moral philosophy. Hence ‘natural’ must first denote the space-time continuum of objects and events – among which is the human mind – known by experience and observation. For example, cf. T 3.1.2.10, T 2.3.2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. T 2.1.3.2-3.

(T 3.1.2.7). And, yet worse, along with ‘artifice’, it is a word that “admits of an invidious Construction” (L 38).<sup>8</sup>

Education admittedly is “an artificial and not a natural cause, and as its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves in different times and places,” Hume warns “‘tis never upon that account recogniz’d by philosophers; tho’ in reality it be built almost on the same foundation of custom and repetition as our reasonings from causes and effects” (T 1.3.9.19). Hence, although generally unnoticed by philosophers, there is a *natural* (or almost natural) element to it. In the concluding lines of “Of knowledge and probability” Hume eloquently states: “Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin” (T 1.3.16.9). Custom and habit are indeed ‘natural principles’. They have “the same influence on the mind as nature,” and can enliven an idea of the imagination “infixing the idea with equal force and vigour” as one of memory (T 1.3.5.6). In the production of *this* effect, there is, therefore, an *artificial* element to them, the very one which might seem to be restricted to products of education.

As a result of the analysis of the human understanding in the *Treatise*, nature and artifice nearly merge into one another. Hume calls ‘natural artifices’ some of our minds’ operations, and highlights the *neutral* character of artifice. Early in Book 1, he defines geometry as “the *art*, by which we fix the proportions of figures” (T 1.3.1.4), and an “art” because it “much excels both in universality and exactness, the loose judgments of the senses and imagination; yet never attains a perfect precision and exactness” (T 1.3.1.4).

Belief achieved by way of reflection, without the direct aid of custom, he also considers “oblique and artificial,” such as for example, single experiment accounts (T 1.3.8.13). Indirect and oblique is also the way by which we form the belief in an external world from the frequency and coherence of our perceptions – a world that is real and durable far beyond experienced uniformity. Although natural, this belief is “not a direct and natural effect of the constant repetition and connexion,” nor is it a conclusion of reason (T 1.4.2.21).

The fiction of identity displays artifice as well: there is an artifice by which we obtain identity through “producing a reference of the parts to each other, and a

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<sup>8</sup> Two interesting passages of “A Letter from a Gentleman” should be noted: (i) in the last paragraph, Hume denounces the Art of his accuser, who by broken, partial citations perverts the sense of his writing (L 41); (ii) he expresses full awareness of the ambiguous semantic of ‘artifice’ (and its concurrent risks), by saying: “When the Author asserts that Justice is an *artificial*, not a *natural* virtue, he seems sensible that he employed Words that admit of an invidious Construction; and therefore makes use of all proper expedients, by *Definitions* and *Explanations*, to prevent it” (L 38).

combination to some *common end* or purpose" (T 1.4.6.11), or else we ascribe identity to a series of distinct, different and separate impressions on being unconsciously misled by the smooth progress of thought along gradual changes, or changes that seem small in proportion to the whole. In the latter artifice, the belief is strictly false, and the identity, fictitious. But at the same time it constitutes quite a functional perceptual compromise, and reposes on the natural "propension to bestow an identity on our resembling perceptions," itself due to the easy transition of the imagination (T 1.4.2.43, 1.4.6.6). Thus here 'artifice' signifies an unintended trick of the mind upon itself.

Of the same order is the 'trick' by which nature deceives us into thinking that human life possesses intrinsic importance. Yet again, the belief is not rigorously true, but it has a function in a matter itself of the utmost importance – our conduct in life.

Still in a neutral sense, there is artifice whenever one devises means to ends, especially, once more, if the means are indirect and oblique. In the case of deliberate tricks, the trickster makes use of her knowledge of how the mind works in order to raise a passion in the subject. Rules of art are an example. Founded on the qualities of human nature, they take advantage of the easy transition of ideas and emotions or impressions, and pay due heed to our incapacity to pass in a moment "from one passion and disposition to another quite different one" (T 2.2.8.18).

Poets, orators, politicians, priests, and even philosophers are artificers of this sort. For instance, in the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume cites Cotta in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* behaving thus: in order to vanquish his interlocutors' resistance, he gradually (and cunningly) progresses in his argument from less to more momentous superstitious beliefs.

The rules of poetical composition are not but a set of artifices: poets, particularly tragedians, borrow from history because history is already familiar, believed to be true and thus able to "procure a more easy reception" and "deeper impression in the fancy and affections" (T 1.3.10.7, T 1.3.10.5, T 1.3.10.6). With a similar intention, poets, like Homer in the *Odyssey*, first show the hero near the end of his designs, and then go back in time. This, according to Hume, excites curiosity and allows the rapid flow of narrative.

Much like poets, orators employ artifice to affect the passions. They embrace the "principles" of the audience, "work themselves up in heights of feeling and passion," and thus inflame themselves and their audience into their cause. In their speeches, they create mounting expectation so as to raise a passion that will add its strength to the strength of the main passion they want to incite – they make

use of the natural transfusion, union, or conversion of passions into each other (T 2.3.4.3). Their other artifices include rapid speech, verbosity, puns, rhymes, and jungles of words. In tribunals, they try to move the judges by showing vivid pictures, and bringing to court pleading family members of their clients – a vivid presence.

Whenever one contrives means to ends, there is artifice. But the nature of the means, and of their ends varies immensely – and neutrality stops at this point. Sometimes, it stops simply as a matter of the artificer's competent or incompetent use of her resources. In works of art, such as “tables, chairs, scritoires,” just as in nature, beauty “is chiefly deriv'd from their utility, and from their fitness for that purpose, to which they are destin'd” (T 2.2.5.17, also T 2.3.4.3). Not always the artificer achieves her purpose. Or, for example, a figure in a painting “which is not justly ballanc'd, is disagreeable; and that because it conveys the ideas of its fall, of harm, or of pain: Which ideas are painful, when by sympathy they acquire any degree of force and vivacity” (T 2.2.5.19). Although of a different character, this is another case of artifice gone wrong.

Sometimes neutrality stops much sooner, already at the level of intentions, and intended ends. In the *History of England*, Hume's liberal use of the word “artifice” applies to the reformation, the counter-reformation, and the whole political spectre, from gross and artless actions to subtle and artful ones. In politics, an artifice may indicate necessary, and even admirable ingeniousness. It can support government, peace and the public good, by restraining violent passions and arousing, in a faint echo of Mandeville, a sense of honour and shame. It substitutes brute force and, along with courage, paves the way to authority. As Hume says, enemies are overcome by arms, and friends, if not by the artifices of “persuasion and entreaty,” then by the rude artifices of “flattery and favor.” In refined society, at times, one is meant to see through an artifice. It is not deception one meets with then, but “decent pretense.”

Dissimulation and lies are negatively marked artifices if they aim to mislead by devious means. In its worst connotations, artifice is the art of monks and certain politicians, who make use of forgery, falsehood, and fraud. Religious moral precepts can be said to be artifices of this sort, when one observes that religion covers fanaticism, bigotry, and persecution. Perhaps the political sphere is where the uses and value of artifice range the most widely. In rulers, artifice is wrong if it serves oppression, though, according to Hume, it is not as condemnable if it consists in mere levity. When Hume alludes to “profound politics” he usually means hypocrisy. Likewise, when he alludes to artifice in connection with “refinement” he may signify evasiveness, equivocation, ambiguity, insincerity, deceit, or in a word, yet again, hypocrisy. Differing from impetuous passions, artifice may as-

sume the appearance of simplicity and moderation, and thus obtain a subtle influence. Court intrigues are its outcome.

In brief, ubiquitous in the *Treatise*, the notion of artifice appears throughout Hume's work, taking on relevant and sometimes unexpected applications in different contexts. As we have noted, it is embedded in the understanding's operations; it is a resource of orators, poets, philosophers, educators and priests; it can be voluntary or involuntary, well or ill meant. Its progress appears to begin in mimicking and to end in encompassing nature itself – a sign of Hume's inquisitive sagacity.

But it is by calling 'artificial' an entire class of virtues, that Hume performs the boldest act of moral re-signification of this term. The concept of 'artificial virtues' is possibly his most relevant single contribution to the semantics of artifice. As we shall see next, he begins, once again, by softening the division between nature and artifice in morals.

### **Artificial virtues**

In the *Treatise's* ethical theory, the concept of nature is summoned first in connection with the sentiments of pleasure and pain that distinguish virtue and vice, or the "more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded" (T 3.1.2.6). Hume asks: are they in nature? Although for many the immediate reply is that virtue is natural, and vice, unnatural, this is not his stance. For him, nature is not unequivocally the criterion, for its meaning is not itself unequivocal. "If nature be opposed to miracles," he says the foundation is obviously natural, for neither virtues nor vices are miraculous. But if nature is opposed to the rare and unusual, the answer ceases to be obvious: "Frequency and rarity depend upon the number of examples we have observ'd; and as this number may gradually encrease or diminish, 'twill be impossible to fix any exact boundaries betwixt them" (T 3.1.2.8). Furthermore, in cases of stable frequency, by this criterion, not only virtue may be found to be more unusual than vice, but also a virtue and a vice that are rare (for example, heroic virtue and brutal barbarity) would both turn out to be unnatural. Hume solves this puzzle by arguing that it is the moral sentiments themselves that are natural, and that *they* are widespread and deeply rooted (T 3.1.2.8). Lastly, when nature is opposed to artifice, the answer remains inconclusive. Hume declares: "'tis impossible for me at present to give any precise answer to this question. Perhaps it will appear afterwards, that our

sense of some virtues is artificial, and that of others natural” (T 3.1.2.9).<sup>9</sup> In conclusion: “‘Tis impossible, therefore, that the character of natural and unnatural can ever, in any sense, mark the boundaries of vice and virtue” (T 3.1.2.10).

Now, if one considers not the merit or demerit of an action but the action as such, virtue and vice are equally artificial – and the action’s artifice resides in its being performed by a determination of the will, with intention and design. In Hume’s words:

‘Tis certain, that both vice and virtue are equally artificial, and out of nature. For however it may be disputed, whether the notion of a merit or demerit in certain actions be natural or artificial, ‘tis evident, that the actions themselves are artificial, and are perform’d with a certain design and intention; otherwise they cou’d never be rank’d under any of these denominations (T 3.1.2.10).

Cutting the distinction this way takes artifice to mean anything reasoned and human-made, as opposed to blind natural necessity.<sup>10</sup> Artifice in this sense, otherwise quite ordinary, becomes morally prominent after the introduction of the artificial virtues.

Headed by justice – with rules for stability of possession, transference by consent and performance of promises, and the notions of property, right and obligation – these virtues include allegiance to government, good manners, modesty and chastity, especially female and, at least in part, male courage. Although both kinds benefit society, differently from the natural social virtues – meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, and equity<sup>11</sup> – which are objects of spontaneous sentiments of approbation, the approbation of artificial virtues does not originate in the natural passions, but in interest. They are rule-governed, and the pleasure we take in witnessing compliance with the rules is a

<sup>9</sup> Hume’s  *caveat*: the question wrongly assumes an exclusive opposition between nature and human projecting and designing, while in truth both of them are necessary principles.

<sup>10</sup> We have met this sense of artifice earlier in this paper. Although not technical, it conveniently distinguishes cases in which human thought and consciousness are at work in contrast to anything unintended, spontaneous, or established by force, habit, and unthinking acquiescence. A harmless example would be mechanics, or “the art of regulating the motions of bodies *to some design’d end or purpose*” (T 2.3.3.2).

<sup>11</sup> The *Treatise*’s list of natural virtues includes, among others: due pride and greatness of mind, with the accompanying ‘shining virtues’ of courage, intrepidity, ambition, love of glory, and magnanimity (T 3.3.2); goodness and benevolence, with the accompanying ‘tender virtues’ of generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, and liberality (T 3.3.3); even anger and hatred, in some circumstances (T 3.3.3.7); natural abilities, such as knowledge, good sense, judgment, genius, wit, humour, prudence, discretion, industry, perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy, temperance, frugality, economy, resolution, and memory (T 3.3.4.7-8, 13); and even cleanliness (T 3.3.4.10).



product of education and reflection on their advantages. In approving them we approve conventional practices for stability in the possession of goods, with a view to the social peace and order that result thereby (T 3.2.1.1). Universality and inflexibility – defining features of justice – cannot be derived from nature (T 3.2.6.9). Nor can therefore be entirely derived from nature the moral sentiment for the public interest, or the sense of justice as a virtue (T 3.2.7.11).

Hume claims that a sense of justice as a virtue “arises artificially, tho’ necessarily from education, and human conventions” (T 3.2.1.17), that “*those impressions, which give rise to this sense of justice, are not natural to the mind of man, but arise from artifice and human conventions*” (T 3.2.2.21), and also that the sense of morality in the observance of these rules [of justice] follows *naturally*, and of itself [after interest is once establish’d and acknowledg’d]; tho’ ‘tis certain, that it is also augmented by a new *artifice*, and that the public instructions of politicians, and the private education of parents, contribute to the giving us a sense of honour and duty in the strict regulation of our actions with regard to the properties of others” (T 3.2.7.11).

Thus, according to Hume, artificial virtues oppose nature mostly insofar as artifice denotes a “voluntary convention,” “purposely contrived,” and “directed to a certain end.” In other words, the opposition holds insofar as artifice refers to “reason, forethought, design, and a social union and confederacy among men” (EPM, App. 3, fn. 64); or as it means, “along with a *natural Instinct*, a certain Reflection on the general Interests of Human Society, and a Combination with others” (L 38).

Otherwise, the artificial virtues *are* natural since (i) they tend to the good of humankind, and serve the convenience and advantage of society; (ii) they promote the satisfaction of the natural passions and appetites, even if by ways other than “their headlong and impetuous motion” (T 3.2.5.9); (iii) they have the “source of the esteem, which we pay” to them in our natural propensity to sympathy, and this esteem takes the natural form of a sentiment of approbation (T 3.3.1.9). Indeed, in morals, artifice comes only to correct and extend natural sympathy.

Finally, they are not phantom virtues. Their being works of thought does not make them less genuine nor lessens their effect on human conscience. For moralists or politicians, “[a]ll they can pretend to, is, to give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner” (T 3.2.5.9). Offsprings of the passions, the artificial virtues are “only a more artful and more refin’d way of satisfying them” (T 3.2.6.1).

Hume performs a double revision by conjoining artifice and virtue. In his meta-ethical theory, he places virtue in character traits and dispositions that motivate action under the proper circumstances. To avoid a circular reasoning, the first motive of virtue must be some natural affection, not regard for virtue itself. When the latter is the case, and oftentimes it is, it is then parasitic, and emulates or disguises the appropriate motivation, from a sense of duty, or shame, or regard for fame, for example, which may, in the end, by habit, result in the acquisition of the proper sentiment. In the artificial virtues, however, if they are to be taken as genuine virtues, the circle seems to be inevitable, for their practice is motivated by duty alone. Or else, the motivation is at bottom self-interest and the passion of avidity, the satisfaction of which is achieved by the artificial means of discipline, education, and civilization. The merit of artificial virtues seems to rest uniquely on the observance of their rules. Hence, escape from the circle risks the fall into moral error-theory in regard to the artificial virtues.<sup>12</sup>

None of the possibilities above seems to fit a “natural system of morals,” and indeed Hume’s revision derives its strength from his emphasis on the naturalness of the artificial virtues: for according to him natural is our sense of virtue, natural is our sense of right and wrong, and also natural is the influence of the passions. The artifice that founds the artificial virtues is itself entirely natural. Thus while the term “artifice” loses amoral or immoral connotations, the term “virtue” takes on artificial connotations – as we have seen, the artificial virtues are as much valued as the natural ones.

The artificial virtues are as much valued as the natural ones: Hume divests the term “artifice” of negative evaluative connotations. This is no mean feat in an environment where ‘artifice’ quite often evokes blunt trickery, deceit, manipulation, and dishonesty; or where it evokes caprice, contingency, impermanence, and whim. Harsh criticism compels Hume defensively to reiterate his arguments, in “A Letter from a Gentleman” (1745) against the charge of his having destroyed, in the *Treatise*, “all the Foundations of Morality” (L 36). Another telling example

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<sup>12</sup> For a rich discussion of this problem cf. Marcia Baron, “Hume’s Noble Lie: An Account of His Artificial Virtues,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1982): 539-55 (who claims that we must be nobly lied to so as to believe that the benefits of justice are in each person’s interest, which they are not always); David Gauthier, “Artificial Virtues and the Sensible Knave,” *Hume Studies* 18.2 (1992): 401-428 (who argues, against Baron, that we lie to ourselves, and that Hume “does actually hold, that the interested obligation to keep promises is in itself non-moral, and so by contrast natural, and that it is also artificial, and so by contrast not natural” (p. 405)); and the case against Gauthier presented by Annette C. Baier, “Artificial Virtues and the Equally Sensible Non-Knaves: A Response to Gauthier,” *Hume Studies* 18.2 (1992): 429-440. See also Ted A. Ponko, “Artificial Virtue, Self-Interest and Acquired Social Concern,” *Hume Studies* 9.1 (1983): 46-58, and Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics and Human Nature,” *Hume Studies* 15.1-2 (1999): 67-82

would be Hutcheson's uneasiness over Hume's attribution of an artificial character to justice, to which Hume replies: had the circumstances of human life been other, justice might not have come to be – but being what they are, it is an obvious and necessary invention. In this way, justice is “naturalized”. Or, as he explains, it is artificial, but not arbitrary.<sup>13</sup>

See, for instance, the poignant passage in *Treatise* 3.2.2.19:

To avoid giving offense, I must here observe, that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word *natural*, only as opposed to *artificial*. In another sense of the word; as no principle of the human mind is more natural than a sense of virtue; so no virtue is more natural than justice. Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as any thing that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflection. Tho' the rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*. Nor in the expression improper to call them *laws of nature*, if by natural we understand what is common to any species, or even if we confine it to mean what is inseparable from the species (T 3.2.1.19).

In the same self-justificatory mode, the conclusion of the *Treatise* reaffirms:

Tho' justice be artificial, the sense of its morality is natural. 'Tis the combination of men, in a system of conduct, which renders any act of justice beneficial to society. But when once it has that tendency, we *naturally* approve of it; and if we did not so, 'tis impossible any combination or convention cou'd ever produce that sentiment (T 3.3.6.4).

Hume avoids also an indiscriminate use of “artifice.” *Contra* Mandeville,<sup>14</sup> faithfully following Shaftesbury and others, he argues that:

had not men a natural sentiment of approbation and blame, it cou'd never be excited by politicians; nor wou'd the words *laudable* and *praise-worthy*, *blameable* and *odious*, be any more intelligible, than if they were a language perfectly unknown to us (T 3.3.1.11).

And that:

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. letter to Hutcheson (1739), *Letters* 33.

<sup>14</sup> In other words, Hume rejects the view that all moral distinctions might be “represented... as the effect of artifice and education, when skilful politicians endeavour'd to restrain the turbulent passions of men, and make them operate to the public good, by notions of honour and shame” (T 3.3.1.11).

The utmost politicians can perform, is, to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the materials, and give us some notion of moral distinctions (T 3.2.2.25).

In short, nature provides material for and supports moral distinctions achieved by the artificial virtues.<sup>15</sup> In their turn, these virtues assist nature by extending the natural sentiments. They promote a “progress of sentiments.”<sup>16</sup> Or, while artifice extends nature, it gets extended itself in natural ways, by moralists and educators.<sup>17</sup> We may say that in Hume’s model some of the most meaningful moral experiences and virtues involve a measure of artifice. We may also say that, in morals, artifice comes to enlarge the natural sphere. In the few lines of the second *Enquiry* which Hume dedicates to this question, his last word, in what concerns the naturalness or artificialness of justice, is that all dispute is, ultimately, “merely verbal” (EPM, App.3, fn.64). The main reason is that there are multiple senses of ‘natural’, to which he adds that the amount of contrivance (or artifice) is a matter of degree and that the contrivance results from features of human nature and human life that are not themselves contrived.<sup>18</sup> This appears to be the last step in overcoming a dualistic conceptual frame that so deeply preoccupied the early moderns.

By calling ‘artificial’ a class of genuine virtues, Hume softens the division of nature and artifice. However, we may still wonder: does he go as far as to eliminate it altogether? I believe not, for, as we shall see next, artifice does not end in the analysis justice and the artificial virtues.

### Artificial lives

In “A Dialogue”, Hume introduces for the first and only time the concept of “artificial lives”. An appendix to the second *Enquiry*, the dialogue addresses the main sceptical concern of the *Enquiry* – the relativity of moral values and judgments. Palamedes, the narrator’s interlocutor, attempts to shock his friend into assent to moral relativism. He tells tales of ancient paragons behaving in ways that would appall modern moral sensibilities. Upon disclosing their identities, he discovers these personages to be not just locally, but universally esteemed. They are

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<sup>15</sup> In the same spirit: “[N]ature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is incommodious in the affections” (T.3.2.2.9).

<sup>16</sup> This progress is beautifully drawn in Annette Baier’s *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> David Gauthier *op. cit.* helpfully distinguishes the several senses of “natural”.

<sup>18</sup> I owe this explanation to Don Garrett.

admirable ancient Greeks and Romans, whose conduct one cannot simply dismiss as belonging to vicious members of vicious societies. Furthermore, by pointing to particular acts and deeds in his relation, Palamedes ensures that moral appraisal does not take place merely in abstract (e.g. T 2.3.6.3-4). The question he raises is nothing like: "Is suicide wrong?" but instead: "What is one who presently judges suicide wrong to make of cases in which it is judged honorable, by model societies that are in many ways highly regarded? Societies constituted by rational individuals who are friends of virtue, one of whom is the suicide himself?"

The narrator responds with the claim that cultural differences notwithstanding,<sup>19</sup> all humans are determined by the same principles, morally approving what is agreeable or useful to self or others ("A Dialogue" 26). Although plausible, this is not an entirely satisfactory answer. Agreement on the useful and agreeable as principles of moral approval does not preclude disagreement on what they amount to.<sup>20</sup> Thus moral relativism may ensue, and turn so fierce as to make irrelevant or merely apparent the absence of conflict at the level of principles. The narrator says: "Sometimes men differ in their judgment about the usefulness of any habit or action. Sometimes also the peculiar circumstances of things render one moral quality more useful than others, and give it a peculiar preference" ("A Dialogue" 38). And: "[i]t must be confessed that chance has a great influence on national manners; and many events happen in society, which are not to be accounted for by general rules" ("A Dialogue" 49). In one possible interpretation, Hume in "A Dialogue" shows signs of an incipient sensitivity to moral diversity. If this is correct,<sup>21</sup> the interesting question then becomes: how far does his sensitivity extend? How does it affect the naturalness of his "natural system of morals"? It stops short of the realm of 'artificial lives' – those lives corrupted ei-

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<sup>19</sup> In the language of "A Dialogue" 25: the influence of "fashion, vogue, custom, and law."

<sup>20</sup> In fact, elsewhere, Hume points to a difficulty inherent in the moral vocabulary. Virtue implies praise, and vice, blame. Nonetheless, agreement on generic terms is insufficient: a term may express approbation and therefore signify a virtue (or, correspondingly, disapprobation of a vice) while having diverse, and even conflicting references. In his view: "Of all expressions, those, which, together with their other meaning, imply a degree either of blame or approbation, are the least liable to be perverted or mistaken" ("Of the Standard of Taste", *Essays* 227-9 and EPM 9.8).

<sup>21</sup> This sensitivity can be also traced elsewhere in Hume's text. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume notes that a person's temper and abilities must suit her circumstances in order to be appreciated (EPM 6.9); and that valuing memory, physical strength, and courage goes through marked changes from ancient to modern times (EPM 6.19, 6.26). While in a warring age courage was highly ranked, in the more peaceful modern age, the social and civil virtues (humanity, clemency, order, tranquility) rise to a degree never experienced before (EPM 7.13-18).

ther by philosophical enthusiasm or by religious superstition.<sup>22</sup> For Hume, in the past, philosophy caused greater concern, but in the present, it is religion that does so.

Religious superstition includes medieval scholastic monks as well as modern religionists and religious philosophers. They all invest the power of imagination and feeling on a fictitious world of their own. Often, their purportedly “refined and spiritual” perceptions mask sheer absurdity, and quite often what they take for a philosophical concept is superstition in disguise. Although both kinds erect false artificial metaphysics, they err differently.

While religion creates a new world, philosophy assigns new causes to events in the actual world (T 1.4.7.13). In the *Enquiry*, Hume calls it ‘fairy land’ when referring to Malebranche’s occasionalism (EHU 7.1.24).<sup>23</sup> According to the *Treatise*, the discovery that we cannot know real causes or perceive connections among objects leads the Cartesians (T 1.3.14.8-10), and more dramatically among them Malebranche, to build a new realm from where all causal power, which he identifies with divine volition, operates.<sup>24</sup> Religious superstition is the corrupting

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<sup>22</sup> In the analysis of the four essays (“Hume’s Essays on Happiness”, *Hume Studies* 15.2 (1989), 307-324), John Immerwahr affirms: “In fact, Hume seems to distinguish between three levels of naturalness and artificiality. Some of our sentiments and passions are original in the sense that they are not dependent on art and civilization but would exist even among men in a *rude and more natural condition* (T 479). Other qualities such as justice are artificial in the sense that they are invented and learned in a social context, but still natural in a larger sense in that they are *obvious and absolutely necessary* (T 484) features of the human condition. Hume distinguishes these artificial but natural qualities from a third category of things that are not only artificial but *arbitrary* (T 484). This category would presumably include the *monkish virtues* (*celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification*, etc.) that Hume discusses in a later work. Although these virtues can be inculcated by bad education, they have no real basis and in reality are vices rather than virtues” (p. 311). (Myself, I should rather substitute “common life” and “experience” for “real basis”). In an interesting article James King contends that the artificial system does not constitute a genuine alternative morality. A mere corrective to determinate historical circumstances, it contains false beliefs, gives rise to lives not worthy of moral esteem, and fails to meet one fundamental formal condition: corrigibility by experience and reasoning.” Cf. James King, “Hume on Artificial Lives with a rejoinder to A. C. MacIntyre,” *Hume Studies* 14.1 (1988): 53-92.

<sup>23</sup> Hume has in mind other Cartesians as well. In “A Letter” he affirms that Descartes and Malebranche recognized no primary or secondary force in matter, for philosophical, not religious reasons (L 32). However, in that context, he is writing under the pressure of charges of atheism and infidelity, and is obviously intent on showing that philosophical reasons can contradict religious teachings in the works of even the most orthodox thinkers. On the question of Cartesians and the idea of power, cf. T 1.3.14.8-10.

<sup>24</sup> See T 1.4.5.31 for the argued presentation of Hume’s criticism, in the discussion of the immateriality of the soul.

force behind Malebranche's philosophical speculation.<sup>25</sup> It seems as though Malebranche is an example of the combination of philosophy and religion. His is a worse predicament than that of other false philosophies, themselves also dreams or fictions of imagination. As Hume says: "fictions of the antient philosophy concerning *substances, and substantial forms, and accidents, and occult qualities* ... however unreasonable and capricious, have a very intimate connexion with the principles of human nature" (T 1.4.3.1). By which he only means: they repose on habit, smooth transitions, easy, and effortless conceptions in the mind. In their turn, the foundation and conclusions of Malebranche's philosophy are "remote from common life and observation," and lay "entirely out of the sphere of experience" (EHU 7).

In the case of Pascal, the corruption is *moral*, and therefore, more disturbing.<sup>26</sup> Misled by superstition, he struggles against the natural passions of love and pride, and the constants of human nature, such as pleasure, pain, the passions, gratitude to friends and resentment of injuries.<sup>27</sup> As Diogenes, the "philosopher", did in the past, Pascal, the "saint", embodies in the present the concept of 'artificial life'. In "A Dialogue" Hume describes him as "a man of parts and genius as well as DIOGENES himself; and perhaps too, a man of virtue, had he allowed his virtuous inclinations to have exerted and displayed themselves." It seems that, unfortunately, like so many others in the grip of superstition, he did not allow his

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<sup>25</sup> Except for the specific influence of religion, it is undeniable that Hume holds Malebranche in high esteem as a philosophical mind. Among the many available evidences, we might point to the fact that he recommends study of the *Recherche* in preparation to the reading of the *Treatise*, and specifically names Malebranche and Locke in presenting his theory of ideas in the Abstract to the *Treatise*. In fact, Hume's position concerning Malebranche's occasionalism and religion certainly is not as simple as I suggest above. In a personal communication, Miguel Badía-Cabrera disagrees with my "making Malebranche an exemplar of an "artificial life."" He says: "I think that the situation here is much more complex than you make it appear, for Hume – I believe – is not suggesting that Malebranche's occasionalism, which makes God the only true cause, is due to the silent and theoretically damaging influx of religious superstition into his speculative philosophy." Badía-Cabrera is probably right.

<sup>26</sup> By attributing "corruption" to lives (philosophical or not) ruled by religious principles, Hume upturns the traditional rhetoric of the fallen state of man. (In this light, passages like the one in the *Dialogues* which recalls the saying "The corruption of the best things results in the worst" may acquire an unsuspected naturalistic connotation, transgressive of religious assumptions).

<sup>27</sup> In the words of Hume as a character in "A philosophical and religious dialogue in the shades, between Mr. Hume and Dr. Dodd" (1778): "That humiliating idea of human nature that Monsieur Pascal has carried to such an extravagant length, that despondent diffidence of its powers, and constant appeal to superior being, may depress the generous sentiments of the mind." (Cf. *Early Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation*, vol. 2, ed. James Fieser (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005, 76-7).

virtuous inclinations to exert themselves, and thus he corrupted his nature, in an irretrievable way.

Hume says in the *Treatise*: “Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous” (T 1.4.7.13). Errors in religion are dangerous, among other reasons, because “as superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions” (T 1.4.7.13). In the political sphere, religion induces faction, oppression, and slavery. In morals, it “aggravate[s] our natural infirmities,” and disorders and weakens our natural frame (see the *Natural History of Religion*), weakens our attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity (see *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, part xii), and perverts our natural instincts. Hume stresses this all in repeated criticism of the monastic virtues.

Hume describes also a ‘philosophical enthusiasm’ that includes ancient thinkers in general and, in his time, interestingly, excessive sceptics. Among the ancients, as we know, Diogenes and the cynics – in their extreme ferocity – are exemplary.<sup>28</sup> They make brief appearances in the *Treatise* and essays, in addition to “A Dialogue”.<sup>29</sup> Their way of life is Hume’s model of a life shaped by the principles of a philosophical theory.<sup>30</sup> The defining feature of philosophical enthusiasm rests on what Hume calls the invention of an ‘artificial happiness’.<sup>31</sup> He says: “But of all the fruitless attempts of art, no one is so ridiculous, as that which the severe philosophers have undertaken, the producing of an *artificial happiness*, and making us be pleased by rules of reason, and by reflection” (“The Epicurean”, *Essays* 139). According to Hume, speculatively at least, the philosophical sceptics (himself, in some moods, included) practice this species of ‘philosophical devotion’.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The Cynics are not the only ones. In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume claims that the Stoics “join a philosophical enthusiasm to a religious superstition” Cf. NHR 174.5.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. “Of Moral Prejudices” reference to the “liveliness and ferocity” of Diogenes’ temper on the basis of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* and Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives* (*Essays* 540).

<sup>30</sup> They behave no less extravagantly than monks, with a crucial difference: contrary to monks, cynics do not deny nature, but affirm it, to the point of excess. Also contrary to monks’, their conduct, entirely affirmative, is not threatening to self or others.

<sup>31</sup> The expression itself originates in Epicurean criticism of the Stoics.

<sup>32</sup> Hume is fully aware of his susceptibility to this danger. He makes a witty reference to it when, in a youthful letter to Henry Home, he says that he excluded from the original manuscript of the *Treatise* parts that might appear offensive. In his own words, “I was resolved not to be an enthusiast, in philosophy, while I was blaming other enthusiasms” (*Letters* 6). And yet, as Mossner tells in *The Life of David Hume*, once, among friends, the description Hume gave of himself was: “An enthusiast without religion, a philosopher, who despairs to attain truth.” Cf. Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 570.



Philosophy, however, demands effort, engages few, and is easily overcome by the callings of common life. Or, in Hume's words, philosophy "if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities." In other words: "The conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its arts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy" (T 1.4.1.11).<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

"A Dialogue" ends in rejection of artificial lives. Hence, for Hume, there are limits to artifice or, in other words, to the merging of nature and artifice. Previously in this essay, it has been granted that not all artifices are good to human thought and practice. When it comes to artificial lives, they are considered bad without exception – hence they constitute a kind apart. The main point is that, in their many different ways, *all* artificial lives attempt a *total diversion from natural propensities*. That makes them, ultimately, unable to sustain individual and social co-existence, and sometimes, not even survival.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps this explains why, for once, Hume, usually wary of sweeping generalizations, does not hesitate in generalizing.

In the physical world, the growth of bodies, natural and artificial, is checked by internal causes, derived from their "enormous size and greatness." The mental world has its own limits. In consonance with this intuition, in the first *Enquiry*, even though Hume declares triumphant the modern expression of philosophical scepticism, he argues that this philosophy destroys the conviction temporarily, but

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<sup>33</sup> The superior force of natural belief is thus explained:

As the emotions of the soul prevent any subtle reasoning and reflection, so these latter actions of the mind are equally prejudicial to the former. The mind, as well as the body, seems to be endow'd with a certain precise degree of force and activity, which it never employs in one action, but at the expence of all the rest. This is more evidently true, where the actions are of quite different natures; since in that case the force of the mind is not only diverted, but even the disposition chang'd, so as to render us incapable of a sudden transition from one action to the other, and still more of performing both at once. No wonder, then, the conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy (T 1.4.1.11).

<sup>34</sup> In their extravagance, victims of religious superstition may seek to suffer martyrdom, and thus forfeit the very principle of self-preservation.

its influence is never lasting and should not be, for this would result in the summary destruction of human life.

He yields, if only temporarily, and in the reclusion of the closet, to scepticism about the independent existence of external objects and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, concerning the senses; to the sceptical paradoxes of the infinite divisibility of space and time, concerning demonstrative reason; and to his own sceptical doubts concerning moral evidence in causal reasoning. However, he settles for an Academic, mitigated, useful and lasting form, derived from the correction of the excessive scepticism by common sense and reflection.<sup>35</sup> In nature or in the constant properties of the mind, and in the practice and experience of the world, philosophical reason or, should we say, ‘philosophical devotion’, or yet, ‘excessive scepticism’ encounters its limit.<sup>36</sup>

To conclude, if artifice concerns ends, and if ends comprise human happiness, artifice in philosophy must fall within the bounds of “common life” and “experience”. It seems to me that understanding Hume’s concept of artifice reveals the normative strength of these two fundamental notions of his thought. Also, it seems to me that if we attempt to comprehend Hume’s relation with scepticism, some attention to the notion of artifice, in particular the notion of artificial lives may be useful to us. This is the proposal with which I should like to end this essay.

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<sup>35</sup> However, the excessive or Pyrrhonian experience leaves indelible marks. It introduces doubt, caution, and modesty, restricts enquiry to the limits appropriate to human understanding, and controls the excesses of imagination. Hume does not deny his indebtedness and contributions to Pyrrhonism in the *Enquiry*. In fact, he openly acknowledges them. But as I noted above, I believe it is a Pyrrhonism drawn by his own pen and, in its more colorful tints, reserved perhaps for the closet.

<sup>36</sup> This paper was given to research seminars and colloquia at IASH (The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh), ANPOF (Associação de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia), PUC-Rio (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro), Universidade Nova de Lisboa, and UNISINOS (Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos). I am very grateful to Susan Manning, Pauline Phemister, Anthea Taylor, Donald Ferguson, Déborah Danowski, João Paulo Monteiro, Rui B. Romão, António Marques, Anice Lima de Araújo, Bruno Pettersen, Thomas Lennon, Adriano Naves de Brito, and to all participants in these events. I am also thankful to Miguel Badía-Cabrera and Diálogos. As ever, I owe a debt of gratitude to Don Garrett. The paper is part of a research project sponsored by Conselho Nacional para o Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) and Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (FAPEMIG), Brazil.