

## DAVID HUME ON THE TRUE PHILOSOPHER'S IDENTITY

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**Resumen:** Este trabajo tiene por objetivo mostrar que David Hume esboza la identidad del filósofo genuino mediante dos distinciones: la primera confronta dos modos de considerar nuestra experiencia, revelando una diferencia subyacente entre dos actitudes, la reflexiva y la pre reflexiva. La segunda se refiere a dos partes de la humanidad que parecen ser incompatibles: la activa y la contemplativa, entre las cuales el filósofo genuino busca mediar. La identidad así propuesta conlleva dos contribuciones originales. Por un lado, motiva a los filósofos a tratar acerca de temas relativos a la vida cotidiana. Por otro lado, sugiere que los filósofos no están dotados exclusivamente de una actitud reflexiva, sino que esta actitud es compartida por quienquiera que sea experto en cualquier otra ocupación. La identidad filosófica tampoco es asumida de forma definitiva. Por el contrario, se desempeña en ciertos momentos y lugares, y se alterna con la actitud pre reflexiva.

**Palabras clave:** Hume, reflexión, identidad, activo/contemplativo, vida cotidiana, experto

**Abstract:** This paper aims at showing that David Hume outlines the identity of the true philosopher by means of two distinctions: the first one confronts two ways of considering our experience, which reveals an underlying difference between a pre-reflective and a reflective attitude. The second one concerns two parts of humankind that appear to be incompatible: the contemplative and the active, which the true philosopher aims at mediate. The identity thus proposed results in two original contributions: on the one hand, it motivates philosophers to deal with topics focused on common life. On the other hand, it suggests philosophers are not exclusively endowed with a reflective attitude, rather, this attitude is shared with anyone who is an expert on any other occupation. Neither is the philosophical identity assumed once and for all. On the contrary, it is adopted at certain times and places, and alternates with the pre-reflective attitude.

**Keywords:** Hume, reflection, identity, active/contemplative, common life, expert

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In different passages of his work,<sup>1</sup> David Hume establishes a set of remarks concerning the qualities a philosopher capable of developing the science of human nature must possess. The aim of this paper is to show that in doing so, he outlines an identity that diverges from the portrait of the philosopher as a scholar locked in his cabinet that was a commonplace back in the day. On the contrary, the proposed identity defines philosophical activity in terms of reflection on everyday pre-

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<sup>1</sup> All works by Hume will be cited using abbreviations referenced in the 'Works cited' section.

reflective life, a life where the philosopher also participates in.

A topic that prevailed since antiquity and was widely employed to explore the nature of philosophical personality in the early modern period is the distinction between the active and contemplative lives. In the context of British philosophy, this topic was of great concern in the early years of the Royal Society. This institution presented itself as a model for the development of natural philosophy and the cultivation of the necessary personal qualities of those who pursued it, whose identity should express a combination or synthesis of the active and the contemplative domains (Coldren and Hunter 2008: 316). Traditionally, these opposite realms were represented in turn by means of the images of the gentleman and the scholar. The first *virtuosi* intended to show that the brand-new experimental philosophy was not the old, scholastic, and useless learning of the traditional scholars embodied in the contemplative model, but a useful knowledge suitable for gentlemen, that is, for men who lead active lives. They aimed at re-specifying the existing notions of knowledge and gentility in order to create a new identity of "gentleman-scholar." Their goals failed, though, because well in the Eighteenth-century, the attacks on the pedantry of the learned were still common and did not distinguish between the traditional scholar and the new experimental philosopher (Shapin 1991).

The identity Hume ascribes to philosophers can be related to the emerging tradition of the gentleman scholar introduced by the Royal Society members in the general prospect of emphasising the need for reconciling the realms of action and learning. But Hume's project is different from the *virtuosi's* in the way he intends to establish that reconciliation. Hume does not pretend to refine gentlemen

“into philosophers”, nor involve them in inquiries of a like nature. On the contrary, he believes that philosophers should receive “a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of” (THN 1.4.7.14, SBN 272). In this regard, his proposed identity is an innovative contribution in at least two aspects: firstly, concerning the topics that philosophers must deal with, which are related to common life; secondly, concerning the portrayal of the philosopher as an expert. Hume argues that in order to be a true philosopher one should adopt a reflective attitude.<sup>2</sup> However, this attitude is not an exclusive attribute of philosophers, rather, it is shared with experts on any other occupation. Neither is such identity assumed once and for all. On the contrary, it is adopted at certain times and places, and alternates with the pre-reflective attitude. Therefore, in defining philosophers as experts, Hume sets them on an equal footing with other skilful persons, emphasizing the role of practice and time as much as the natural inclination to philosophize.

There are a couple of distinctions that can be traced out in Hume’s texts that express these two main aspects of Hume’s insight on the identity of the true philosopher. The first one confronts two ways of considering our experience, the vulgar and the philosophical, which reveals an

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<sup>2</sup> Harris (2015: 15) notes that Hume’s philosophical attitude is best described –borrowing an expression from Hume’s autobiography “My Own Life”– in terms of the “man of letters”, which entails “to distance yourself both from the academic specialisms of the university and from the narrow and pedantic obsessions of the gentleman *érudit*.” This description can be related to the reflective attitude I am pointing at, in the sense that Harris (2015:18) argues philosophy from this point of view is understood “not as a body of doctrine or a subject matter, but rather as a habit of mind, a style of thinking, and of writing, such as could in principle be applied to any subject whatsoever.”

underlying difference between a pre-reflective and a reflective attitude. The second distinction is the above mentioned between contemplative versus active life, which the true philosopher aims at reconciling. In this manner, Hume creates a philosophical identity that is not proposed as an unattainable ideal or model that actual philosophers aspire to get closer to. On the contrary, it is delineated in a series of skills a person must accomplish, which Hume himself intends to instantiate with his own activity and way of life.

The two distinctions just outlined must be taken in a broad sense and aim at differentiating philosophical activity from other occupations. In addition to this broad portrait of the philosophical identity, Hume elaborates a series of clarifications within the discipline: some are normative, such as the distinction between true and false philosophy; and others are methodological and stylistic, such as that between the anatomist and the painter.<sup>3</sup> Usually, the scholars have focused on these last distinctions that point out to kinds and ways of doing philosophy. But it is less frequent to find any secondary literature that takes issue with the features that make the philosopher to stand out from the rest of society. My aim is to explore the identity Hume bestows to the moral experimental philosopher<sup>4</sup> in this last, broader sense, highlighting what I consider to be his original contributions to the understanding of the philosophical activity. In order

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<sup>3</sup> The differences between the anatomist and the painter are a matter of debate among the interpreters. I agree with Abramson (2007) in considering that the difference is not limited to style but includes other aspects, such as method.

<sup>4</sup> The expressions "science of human nature" and "moral philosophy" can be understood as equivalents, because Hume himself does so (see EHU 1.1). I added the adjective 'experimental' to emphasize the methodological perspective in which Hume's philosophical project is framed.

to do so, I will look at each of the two general distinctions mentioned above and in passing I will briefly discuss some aspects of the inner clarifications pertaining to the discipline.

### 1. The Reflective Attitude as a Distinctive Feature of the Philosopher

The first distinction establishes a difference between a reflective and a pre-reflective attitude. This distinction usually appears in Hume's texts as that of the philosopher and the vulgar (see, for instance THN 1.2.3.II, SBN 37, 1.3.12.5, SBN 132, 1.3.13.12 SBN 149-50, 1.4.2.12, SBN 192; EHU 7.21, 9.5, 11.3). The interpreters have frequently dealt with it in connection with Hume's discussion of the belief in the external world, as presented in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" (THN 1.4.2), where he portrays different attitudes concerning the possibility of having sensory access to external objects.<sup>5</sup> This section of the *Treatise* is not the only place where Hume addresses the distinction between a reflective and pre-reflective stance. It appears in many of his texts and offer, as a result, an interesting insight not only of alternative ways of understanding our epistemic relationship with the world but also of different possibilities and results of cultivating our cognitive capacities. Thus, the first way of addressing the distinction connects the vulgar or pre-reflective attitude with

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<sup>5</sup> Two recent examples are Rocknak (2013: Parts III – IV), and Ainslie (2015: Chapters 2 and 3). Ainslie (2015: 42) chooses to name the vulgar attitude as unreflective, while Rocknak (2013: 160) says that "the vulgar perspective comes about *reflexively*, that is, without much, if any, *reflection*", but she acknowledges that some reflection is involved after all in that perspective. I choose to call it "pre-reflective" because, as it will be shown below, contrary to what "unreflective" suggests, it can be turned into a reflective attitude.

the role natural beliefs play in our everyday lives as outlined in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses", and the second highlights the possibility of enhancing our natural reasoning skills by means of practise, to reach a reflective attitude. Let us begin with the latter way of portraying the distinction.

### 1.1. The Philosopher as an Expert

Hume argues that the vulgar assumes a pre-reflective attitude while philosophers, or in a wide sense, reasonable men, are characterised by a reflective attitude. What is meant by a reflective attitude? It is important to notice from the outset that it is not the same thing as what Hume calls "consciousness." Udo Thiel (1994) has argued that there is an implicit distinction between consciousness and reflection in Hume's texts. According to Thiel (1994: 108), Hume uses "consciousness" to refer to the immediate awareness of our own mental operations, which is endowed with absolute certainty (see THN 1.4.2.7, SBN 190, 1.4.2.47, SBN 350). However, Hume notes that "it is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind, that, though most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflection, they seem involved in obscurity" (EHU 1.13). Thus, despite the immediate presence of our mental operations, it seems that distinguishing and examining them through reflection is not an easy task (Thiel 1994: 108). This is a clue of the implicit distinction Thiel points at. Unlike consciousness, reflection is not an immediate or automatic relation to oneself, rather it is a deliberate, careful and analytical consideration and evaluation of any subject (Thiel 1994: 106, Harris 2015: 19). The reflective attitude that philosophers assume is related to this critical and careful survey, as will become apparent in what follows.

The difference between pre-reflective and reflective attitudes is evident when Hume says that the vulgar “take things according to their first appearance” while philosophers provide a minute account of the same phenomena “upon an exact scrutiny” (THN 1.3.12.5, SBN 132, see EHU 8.13). Careful and attentive observation and comparison of similar cases allow them to penetrate in the complex structure of physical and moral phenomena, which give them access to a wide variety of events and operations as possible causes of the phenomena they observe. These events and operations are not easily perceived due to their remote and minute nature. The contrast between the vulgar and the philosopher is clearly outlined in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* when Philo presents it to Cleanthes:

Observe, I intreat you, with what extreme caution all just reasoners proceed in the transferring of experiments to similar cases. Unless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon. Every alteration of circumstances occasions a doubt concerning the event; and it requires new experiments to prove certainly, that the new circumstances are of no moment or importance (...) The slow and deliberate steps of philosophers, here, if any where, are distinguished from the precipitate march of the vulgar, who, hurried on by the smallest similitude, are incapable of all discernment or consideration (DNR 2.147).

A reflective attitude not only draws out attention to relevant details, it also leads us to assume a wide perspective that entitles us to establish maxims or general principles. Most people cannot distinguish, in a large quantity of



particular cases, which is the circumstance they have in common; neither can they extract it from other superficial circumstances nor tell the difference between them. Philosophers are able to recognise that feature, and to enlarge their own view in order to encompass the countless number of individual cases that also have it. From that perspective, they can establish general principles that explain the course of moral and natural phenomena (ESY - C, 254).

Hume mentions elsewhere that vulgar opinion is related to the “common and careless way of thinking” (THN 1.4.3.9, SBN 223; see 1.4.2.57, SBN 218), which is distinguished by the preponderance of habit. Habit makes it difficult to separate ideas that usually appear in constant conjunction. After noticing two perceptions conjoined in a number of instances, repeated observation produces a facility to conceive such conjunction, and incline us towards expecting the same regularity in the future (THN 2.3.5.1, SBN 422). Therefore, habit induces the vulgar to consider the separation of ideas that regularly appear in succession as absurd and impossible. This impossibility, in turn, leads to rushed generalizations that often end in prejudice and credulity. According to Hume, philosophers, “who abstract from the effects of custom,” can separate and combine ideas (THN 1.4.3.9, SBN 223), in order to correct vulgar opinions by means of reflection (THN 1.4.6.6, SBN 254). This means they can suspend, at least temporarily, the effects of habit and carefully observe if the relevant circumstances merit a like conjunction of ideas or not.

Notice that, even in the case of philosophers, habit should not be quit but only suspended, because Hume believes that its effects are not intrinsically harmful. On the contrary, they are “essential to the subsistence of all human creatures” (EHU 5.22). Habit merits momentary suspension

when it leads to false beliefs that are in need of revision. But remaining in a state of permanent reflection is not convenient because it leads to a “sceptical malady” that can only be cured by means of “carelessness and in-attention alone” (THN I.4.2.57 SBN 218). Furthermore, as it will be shown in what follows, Hume claims that the philosophical perspective is not free from habit, but rather is rooted in the same cognitive processes as our everyday thinking.

When Hume outlines the distinction between the vulgar and the philosopher, he frequently presents it in seemingly dichotomised terms. However, these different attitudes are not mutually exclusive but constitute a gradation of opinions which rise one above another “according as the persons, who form them, acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge.” (THN I.4.3.9, SBN 222).<sup>6</sup> Thus, reflection is not an activity that exclusively belongs to certain persons, but it is something anyone in principle can develop from an initial stage common to all human beings. We achieve a reflective attitude when our cognitive skills are sufficiently stimulated, which, as Hume acknowledges, does not only depend on our rational nature but also on social and material conditions or “moral causes” (ESY – NC).<sup>7</sup> In the *Dialogues*, Philo

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<sup>6</sup> Livingston (1989: 71) and Ainslie (2015: 154) suggest this gradation can be read as a dialectical conception of philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> Hume points out that extremely poor people are incapable of forming general principles (ESY – PG, vt 616; NC, 198) due to the fact they are ‘immers’d in the animal life’ (ESY – EW, 533) that borders slavery. This condition leads them to be influenced by superstition, which renders people obedient and miserable (ESY – SE, 78). From this point of view, gentlemen, who are endowed with some fortune and education, are more capable of reaching true knowledge through time and experience (ESY – PG, vt 616). In any case, as Chisick (1989) points out, Hume cannot be taken to mean that upper and lower classes are genetically different. “His point is that we are the products of the societies and ranks to which we

explains how a reflective attitude can be improved and refined by means of practice:

From our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endued with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call philosophy is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life; and we may only expect greater stability, if not greater truth, from our philosophy, on account of its exacter and more scrupulous method of proceeding (DNR 1.134).

In this passage, Hume addresses one of the features of reflection already mentioned above: the ability to establish general principles. He delineates it as an inherent capacity of human nature that is refined with experience and the evolution of our cognitive apparatus. Even though Hume argues for the possibility of being endowed with a stronger reason, -which may be regarded as a claim describing an inherent difference between some people and another-, this strength of our reasoning skills is presented as a difference in degree rather than as an absolute disparity, and in any case, does not constitute a sufficient condition for being a philosopher. In order to become a philosopher, our reasoning faculties should be exercised regularly and methodically (see *ESY* – S, 179 n17). In the first *Enquiry* Hume makes a series of remarks in order to discover “the circumstances that make a difference between the

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belong, the occupations we exercise, and the opportunities which we enjoy or from which we are excluded” (13).

understandings of men” (EHU 9.5 n20). He lists a series of qualities that relevantly amount to that difference such as observation, attention and memory, and contends that even though there might be intrinsically larger and narrower minds, it is important as well to cultivate and practice these qualities, in order to be able to surpass other men (see EHU 9.5 n20). Elsewhere, he talks about a “superior penetration, derived from nature” but adds that in apprehending subtle and changing objects of knowledge they are “improved by habit and reflection” (EHU 1.13). In sum, the relevant conditions to be a philosopher are not to be regarded merely as natural gifts but as the result of a sort of cooperation between inherent tendencies, such as a superior attention, subtlety or penetration and an intense and systematical practice of them.

In addition, Hume suggests that reflectivity is not an exclusive feature of philosophers but can be developed by whoever reach a certain degree of expertise in their activity, whatever the kind. This is evident when he illustrates the way the attitude of the vulgar diverges from that of the philosophers’ using the comparison between a peasant and an artisan (De Pierris 2015: 260). On the one hand, the former can give no explanation for the stopping of a clock other than saying that it does not go right; on the other hand, the latter, who knows minutely the mechanical workings of the clock, can venture there is a grain of dust stopping its movement (THN 1.3.12.5, SBN 132; see EHU 8.13). The philosopher can be considered an expert within the realm of learning, just as there are so many other experts in many different realms of activity. Her work is on the same level than that of the clock maker because both have developed a certain degree of expertise in their own fields.

All in all, if we regard the difference between the vulgar and the philosopher considering the results of the developing of our cognitive faculties, vulgar opinion is ranked as the lowest one because it is led by a superficial consideration of things and is guided by custom, which frequently produces rushed conclusions. In this sense, it can be seen as an unrefined or unpolished use of our cognitive capacities which can be corrected and improved with due practice of our reflective capacity and a stimulating environment, leading up to higher degrees of reasoning skills. What makes the philosopher an expert does not consist in inherent mental capacities only. The right social and material conditions, and fundamentally, time and farther experience are decisive features too.

In line with what I stated above regarding the non-mutually exclusion of reflective and pre-reflective attitudes, it is worth noticing that the opinions they give rise to are not necessarily incompatible. Sometimes they coincide, generally when they are about highly uniform phenomena or conjunctions, because these phenomena are “an object of the plainest experience, and depends not on any hypothesis of philosophy” (THN 2.1.11.8, SBN 319, see THN 1.2.3.11). However, in other occasions, philosophical attitude plays the role of perceiving the mistakes involved in vulgar opinions and aims at correcting them (see THN 1.4.2.44, SBN 210; EHU 11.28; 12.24-25), as in the cases of prejudice and credulity. Hume is especially concerned, in this regard, with the effects of superstition, which emerges from a natural disposition of our mind – hopes and fears raised by natural and moral phenomena whose cause appears inexplicable to the vulgar’s minds (see NHR 3.1, ESY –SE 73-4). In order to figure out a cause of these phenomena, the vulgar appeal to the “changeable, weak and irregular” principles of imagination (THN 1.4.4.1, SBN 225-6), which often lead

them to believe in mysterious and invisible powers behind the inexplicable events they observe. They try to ease these passions by means of irrational methods, such as “ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity” (ESY – SE 73-4). Hume believes true philosophers are in a position to point out these mistaken beliefs and the corrupt practices they lead to, and their reflective practice allows them to control, at least temporarily, the natural tendencies they spring from (see Badía Cabrera 1989: 217, Calvo de Saavedra 2012: 258-9).

### **1.2 The Vulgar and the Natural Belief in the External World**

Let us move to the second way of addressing reflective and pre-reflective attitudes that mark the difference between the philosopher and the vulgar. This aspect emphasises the connection between the vulgar attitude and the role natural beliefs play in everyday life. As I already mentioned, Hume explores this topic in full in “Of Scepticism with regard to the senses.” This section of the *Treatise* deals with the mental principles responsible for our taking ourselves to have sensory access to the world. In doing so, Hume poses the distinction between vulgar and philosophical attitudes (Ainslie 2015: 42). My aim is not focused in discussing the different problems raised in this complex section. I will restrict myself to underline an interesting point regarding the fact that we never abandon the vulgar attitude completely. As I suggested above, the vulgar attitude can be seen as a sort of original stage upon which we can build new degrees of reasoning and learning, but it always remains in the background. The “common and careless way of thinking” is related to our sense of immersion in the world assuming

we have direct access to it, due to the fact that we are not aware of any difference between perceptions and objects. We take our perceptions to be objects that exist independently in the world, and not just mental objects (THN 1.4.2.14, SBN 193). This assumption is closely connected to a natural belief –that the objects have an independent and continued existence–,<sup>8</sup> which suggests that pre-reflectivity can be understood as something that cannot be removed by means of reflection, because natural beliefs are by definition universal, inevitable and irresistible, and will always prevail in the end (see THN 1.4.2.44, SBN 210; 1.4.2.46, SBN 211). Importantly too, they are a necessary pre-condition of action (THN 1.4.2.53, SBN 216, 1.4.7.10, SBN 269, EHU 12.23). Hume expounds the relationship between the vulgar assumption and natural belief as follows:

'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take the perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind is the real body or material existence. 'Tis also certain, that this very perception or object is suppos'd to have a continu'd uninterrupted being, and neither to be annihilated by

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of natural belief as a principle of Hume's philosophy was originally proposed by Kemp Smith (2005). He states that natural beliefs are only two: "(a) that objects have a continuing, independent existence, and (b) that in the public world thus constituted bodies (some of which are also selves) are causally operative upon one another" (Kemp Smith 2005: 124). Gaskin (1974: 285) equates the expression "natural belief" which Hume himself does not employ, with "natural instinct", which Hume mentions several times (THN 1.4.2.51, EHU 5.8, 12.7-10). In addition to the two mentioned by Kemp Smith, he proposes a third, which is "belief in the reliability of our senses qualified to take account of acknowledged and isolatable areas of deception" (1974: 285).

our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence (THN 1.4.2.38, SBN 206-207).

On the other hand, a reflective attitude entails acknowledging that our perceptions are not the same as external objects, but mind-dependent entities which are fleeting and interrupted.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the philosopher's task is to explain the mechanism that originates the vulgar belief in a stable and coherent public world, which entails reflection upon our pre-reflective attitude. Her aim is to understand it, even though she cannot remove it.<sup>10</sup> When we adopt a reflective perspective we suspend our vulgar attitude, but this parenthesis, as stated above, is only temporary. This means Hume does not regard pre-reflective and reflective attitudes as fixed and static stances. Rather, he thinks of them as functions we assume at different moments throughout our lives: "As long as our attention is bent upon the subject, the philosophical and study'd principle may prevail; but the moment we relax our thoughts, nature will display herself, and draw us back to our former opinion"

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<sup>9</sup> This does not necessarily entail that Hume argues for a complete skepticism about the existence of the external world. As Waldow (2009: 29-31) points out, he rejects the philosophical position that claims we can establish a correspondence between our perceptions and the external world. Hume circumscribes our cognitive grasp to the realm of perceptions, because "we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects" (THN 1.4.2.47, SBN 212). Thus, he states the impossibility of a direct knowledge of the external world, but cast no doubts about its existence.

<sup>10</sup> Livingston (1989) suggests Hume's point is that philosophers frequently believe they should cease being participants in common life and become spectators and arbiters of whatever domain of custom they are reflecting upon. But this attitude ends in what Livingston (1989: 75) has described as "a profound state of self-alienation." The right attitude to assume is that of a critical participant of common life (1989: 70-1).



(THN 1.4.2.51, SBN 214, see THN 1.4.2.53, SBN 216). Once philosophical reflections lose their force and vivacity, vulgar opinions are restored to their habitual supremacy, because it is neither possible nor desirable to hold for a long time an attitude that requires our greatest effort and mental attention, as shown in the sceptical crisis Hume goes through in the last part of Book I of the *Treatise* (see TNH 1.4.7). At that point, melancholy and delirium produced by the pervasive influence of the reflective attitude are cured by means of nature "either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras" (THN 1.4.7.9, SBN 269). This means that the vulgar attitude is assumed by each one of us anytime in the course of our lives. As Hume himself claims, "the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind" is "all of us, at one time or other" (THN 1.4.2.36, SBN 205). Thus the true philosopher is meant to be someone who is able to reflect and gain understanding of the structure of common life she partakes in.<sup>11</sup>

So far, it has become evident that both ways of addressing the difference between the philosopher and the vulgar highlight important facts concerning these attitudes that can be summarized as follows: (a) the reflective and pre-reflective are not fixed stances correlated to essential qualities, (b) a pre-reflective attitude is at the background of our more refined and elaborated reflections, and (c)

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<sup>11</sup> Waldow (2009: 44) argues that when we are immersed in our daily affairs, we cannot at the same time reflect. 'To put it briefly, we can either act or reflect' (46). Thus, we need to put a pause to our ordinary practices to assume a reflective attitude, because it entails a great mental effort. But this does not mean that in reflecting we assume a spectator attitude such as the one Livingston describes (see footnote 11). Instead, the impossibility of acting and reflecting at the same time points at a recognition of our cognitive limitations.

reflection allows us to momentarily suspend our vulgar way of thinking in order to be aware of it and explain its underlying mechanisms. The difference between the two ways of portraying philosophical and vulgar attitudes I have just sketched above can be understood in terms of perspective: while the first one is genetic, explaining how the reflective attitude evolves from an initial, pre-reflective stage, the second one is descriptive, focusing on the assumptions each attitude entails.

### 1.3 True and False Philosophy

Before I move on to examining the role of the philosopher as a mediator between the learned and conversable<sup>12</sup> worlds, I want to point out briefly a difference that falls within the reflective attitude –that between true and false philosophy. This subsequent distinction is normative in kind and concerns praiseworthy and condemnable philosophical styles. It shows that reflectivity is not a *sine qua non* requisite to grant certainty, because an expert reasoner can make mistakes just as the vulgar does. Hume defines false philosophy as ‘mistaken knowledge’ (THN 1.4.3.9, SBN 223), and traces the sources of these philosophical mistakes to their subjects of enquiry and the method employed. Firstly, concerning subjects of inquiry, Hume considers that philosophy is led astray when heads after that which is forever beyond the limit of our cognitive natures, thus inevitably leading us to darkness and error (THN 1.3.14.27, SBN 168; see EHU 1.11). False philosophers aim to

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<sup>12</sup> Hume employs “conversible,” which in the Eighteenth-century was the adjective derived from “conversation.” However, nowadays this term is related to “conversion.” For this reason, I decided to adopt the modern wording of the term in order to avoid misleading interpretations of it.

penetrate inaccessible entities or forge completely hypothetical concepts such as “faculties” or “occult qualities” to account for what cannot be explained appealing to facts (THN 1.4.3.10, SBN 224). They are qualified to rid themselves from vulgar errors by means of reflection, acknowledging that perceptions and objects are different (THN 1.4.2.46, SBN 211) or that we cannot perceive a causal connection between objects (THN 1.4.3.9 SBN 223). But their amendment of vulgar errors end up in epistemic mistakes<sup>13</sup> when they propose groundless theories, such as the double existence of interrupted perceptions and continuing external objects, or the attribution of causal powers to matter.

The true philosopher, in contrast, is the mitigated skeptic, who restricts her inquiries to the limits of our cognitive capacities (EHU 1.12, 12.25). This entails recognizing that we have a limited perspective on nature that precludes our access to the way things are independently of our understanding (Waldow 2009: 30, Ainslie 2015: 106). The true philosopher acknowledges the inconsistencies of false philosophers as well as the impossibility of removing the pre-reflective attitude. Therefore, she “return[s] back to the situation of the vulgar,” being fully aware that it is the best thing to do (THN 1.4.3.9, SBN 223).

False philosophy also tends to become allies with superstition, leading to harmful consequences for social and political life (EHU 1.11, 11.3, NHR 11.3). Both philosophy and superstition are possible answers to the natural disposition of our mind to search for the causes of phenomena (THN

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<sup>13</sup> Ainslie (2015: 107-108) marks a difference between constitutive and epistemic mistakes. The first ones are those of the vulgar, which are due to natural propensities of the imagination, while the second are those of the philosophers.

1.4.7-13). Superstition, as stated earlier at the end of section 1.1, leads us to adopt irrational beliefs. True philosophy can help us restraining superstitious influences by showing that our fears are grounded in statements that lack empirical foundation, and thus these statements are merely unjustified suppositions. This fact helps reason to prevail over passions at least for a while (THN 2.3.3.6, SBN 415-16, see Badía Cabrera 1989: 302). Conversely, false philosophers cannot recognize the limits of our understanding and forge implausible hypotheses and groundless theories such as the ones I have just mentioned. Corrupted forms of religion make use of the irrational theories and metaphysical jargon of false philosophy to conceal its weaknesses and justify its pernicious rituals and practices (EHU 1.11, see Calvo de Saavedra 2012: 256). Mitigated skepticism is in a position to counteract false philosophy because it takes over our cognitive limits and turns its focus from supra-empirical subjects and mysterious causes to an exam of our everyday practice. True philosophy bears also a relevant practical effect, by means of exposing the harmful consequences that false beliefs induced by false philosophy and religion have over the vulgar. Therefore, Hume promotes the separation of philosophical speculation from religion, in order to set it free from religious and political constraints (see EHU 11, Calvo de Saavedra 2012: 265).

Secondly, methodological mistakes consist in employing philosophical methods in an inappropriate way. The choice between one method and another is based on the nature of their subject; therefore, the success of the inquiry is tied to the proper recognition of what is to be investigated. Besides the fact that the subject must lie within the scope of our cognitive capacities, Hume emphasizes the impossibility of knowing matters of fact by means of demonstrative reason. *A priori* reasoning is only suited to relations of ideas,

quantity and number, and “all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion” (EHU 12.27, see EPM 1.10), namely, false philosophy. Moral and natural inquiries should be conducted by means of the experimental method, which proceeds “deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances” (EPM 1.10). The true philosopher is the one who is able to identify the method suited to her subject of inquiry.

## 2. The Philosopher as a Mediator Between Active and Contemplative Life

Hume outlines the true philosopher's identity by means of another broad distinction, the one between contemplative and active worlds, and endorses a criticism towards the usual portrayal of the philosopher as a pedant. This opposition comes into view in the essay “Of the Study of History,” where he criticises the attitude of certain moral philosophers who are locked down in their cabinets. In contrast with the “man of business,” who considers other people's characters as long as they have relation to his interest, the philosopher contemplates people from an abstract point of view dissociated from human affairs, thus leading him to scarcely perceive the difference between vice and virtue (ESY - SH, 567-568). This criticism of the ordinary way of doing moral philosophy, unrelated to the practice of the world, has a precedent in “An Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour,” one of the first texts written by Hume (Stewart 2000: 270-276). There, he argues philosophers establish rules of behaviour different from the ones fixed by nature. These rules come to be impracticable but endow such philosophers with a feeling of

superiority toward the rest of mankind (AHE, ms 3, col. 2, p. 57).

In this early essay, Hume states it is necessary to correct the relaxing of imagination that leads these philosophers astray when they establish the standards that must guide our conduct. When our imagination does not work by means of regular and universal principles of association, but operates in a relaxed way, being carried along by “changeable, weak, and irregular” principles, it is lead to establish rules that “are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life” (THN 1.4.4.1, SBN 225-226), because they are of a completely hypothetical and speculative kind. If we want to avoid empty and ethereal conceptions, we must be guided by “practice, experience, & reflection,” conforming our fantasies to what is possible by nature, and “instead of an empty shadow, make [them] a solid substance” (AHE, ms 6, col. 1, p. 59). This early condemnation of those moral theories that divert from what lies within the realm of our limited cognitive perspective reveals an incipient distinction between true and false philosophy. But as I will show below, Hume’s disapproval of the moral philosopher cut off from ordinary life does not entail a condemnation of the learned world *per se*. What is condemnable is its distance from the active world, which leads to distorted ways of doing philosophy.

The identity of the true moral experimental philosopher is shown most clearly in “Of Essay-Writing.” In this text, Hume contrasts a disposition towards sociability and everyday life activities with the typical isolation of the learned. The essay begins with a set of distinctions among social groups. In the first place, the “elegant” part of society, who “employs themselves in the operations of the mind,” is confronted with those “immers’d in the animal life” (ESY –

EW, 533), that is, people who must do manual labour in highly unfavourable conditions.<sup>14</sup> Within the elegant part of society, Hume marks a difference between the “learned” and the “conversable.”<sup>15</sup> The learned take on the higher and most difficult operations of the mind, which demands leisure, solitude, a long preparation, and hard work. On the other hand, the conversable, who deal with common life duties, are endowed with a sociable disposition, are inclined to the easiest exercises of the understanding, and look for the company and conversation of their fellow men (ESY – EW, 533-534).<sup>16</sup>

Hume argues there is a gap that separates the two kinds of elegant people, which he regards as a “great defect”, because it acts to the detriment of both groups. If the conversable world is not nurtured from such valuable sources as history, poetry, politics, or the easiest principles of philosophy, it would be reduced to mere gossip and rumours. If the learned remains shut up in their schools and cells, secluded from social life, they would ultimately produce knowledge chimerical in its conclusions and unintelligible in its style and manner of delivery (ESY – EW, 534-535), which, to Hume’s eye, is equal to false philosophy.

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<sup>14</sup> As stated *supra* in note 7, Hume points out that extremely poor people are incapable of forming general principles because they work in a condition that borders slavery.

<sup>15</sup> In the same essay, Hume also refers to these two groups as “men of letters” and “men of the world” (ESY-EW, 535). Despite he frequently talks about “men,” he says women are “the Sovereigns of the Empire of Conversation” (ESY – EW, 535; see Harris 2015: ch. 3). It is worth asking if Hume’s views on the philosopher’s identity is gendered, that is, if they concern men only or if they apply to any person whatsoever. I limit myself to mention this important question, which would merit a separate paper.

<sup>16</sup> In Early Modern usage, the term “conversation” meant not only face-to-face verbal exchange, but all forms of relations involved in social life (Shapin 1991: 289 n46).

Hume argues that this depiction of the gap between the learned and conversable worlds should not lead us to conclude that the best course of action for the philosopher to choose is to leave her cabinet and just burst into the active world. As early as in “An Essay on Chivalry,” Hume ascertains that the philosopher must be nurtured from both active and contemplative worlds, from practice as much as from experience and reflection. This point of view is reaffirmed in “Of Essay-Writing”:

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 these two States, which have so great a Dependence on each other. I shall give Intelligence to the Learned of whatever passes in Company, and shall endeavour to import into Company whatever Commodities I find in my native Country proper for their Use and Entertainment. (...) The Materials of this Commerce must chiefly be furnish'd by Conversation and common Life: The manufacturing of them alone belongs to Learning (ESY – EW, 535).

In this passage the philosopher is portrayed as a mediator between both worlds, and in both ways: firstly, from conversation to learning, she must inform philosophical reflection about those topics related to everyday life. This means that philosophy needs to set aside the abstruse matters it usually deals with and turn to “whatever passes in company,” which is related to the ordinary life interaction (EPM 9.2). Hume is deeply concerned about this topic, which pervades his philosophical works (see THN 1.4.7.14, SBN 272; EHU 1.5, 5.2, 11.27, 12.25; EPM 9.1-3) and is expressed in his conception



of true philosophy in terms of “reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (EHU 12.25). This is confirmed when Hume says that the “materials” will be provided by “conversation and common life,” while the “manufacturing,” that is, methodized and corrected reflection about it, will be left to the learned. Secondly, from learning to conversation, the role the philosopher must accomplish consists in offering these methodized and corrected reflections about ordinary life to the conversable world in an understandable way, so they can be turned into useful and agreeable knowledge, as well as into a guide for ordinary life, instead of being merely abstruse and hypothetical learning.

In this respect, Hume believes true philosophers can contribute to the improvement of social and political conditions in which “common life” takes place. This contribution is expressed in the conclusions the true philosopher draws from “the cautious observation of human life (...) in the common course of the world” (THN Intro 10 SBN xviii-ix) concerning the operating principles and powers of human nature. The maxims inferred from empirical observation allows the true philosopher to instruct the conversable world concerning the ruling passions and inclinations that leads us in our everyday judgements, and also concerning the limits of our cognitive capacities (THN 1.4.7.12). The knowledge of human nature, then, avoids running into philosophical chimeras provoked by the ambition of exceeding our capacities. Most importantly, too, it helps controlling our recurring tendency to superstition and the harmful practical consequences it entails. Even though we cannot remove these superstitious tendencies out of our mental frame permanently, because they are rooted in inherent dispositions, true philosophy orientates us in the choice of a guide to life which bears the safest and more agreeable consequences.

“Of Essay-Writing” aims at showing, in the same vein as “Of the Study of History,” that philosophers should avoid the “recluse method of study” (ESY - EW, 534). They must look into everyday life as a source of nourishment, because otherwise they are at risk of being carried along by the weak and irregular principles of imagination which lead them to build entirely speculative systems: “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?” (ESY - EW, 535). In this passage, Hume expresses that it is perfectly possible to reason without having experience, as in the case of the relations of ideas or, at worst, as in abstruse speculation. This kind of speculation is precisely what he finds most blameable because it frequently turns philosophy into false philosophy. Philosophers who amuse themselves in abstruse topics end isolated from the world, because they believe their reflections are too subtle to take place in ordinary life (see ESY - S, 172). Also, these metaphysical speculations, as we have seen, entail dangerous practical consequences when they become an instrument of degraded forms of religion which make use of them to justify fanatical and submissive attitudes in the vulgar. In contrast, directing philosophy on ordinary life entails two aspects: to conform it to topics that are within human capacity, and to focus on the social realm, whose main features are interaction and communication, by taking part in it.

Even though Hume considers that his role as a philosopher is to mediate between active and contemplative worlds, he acknowledges he belongs to the realm of the learned. How can this statement be reconciled with his condemnation of the secluded philosopher? In “The Sceptic” Hume suggests philosophical reflection requires moderate

detachment (Watkins 2019: 228).<sup>17</sup> This entails distancing oneself from the objects on which one wishes to reflect, to “consider human life, by a general and calm survey” (ESY – S, 179 n17). However, detachment does not mean isolation; philosophers should not avoid contact with the dominion of conversation whereby they get the materials to produce their reflections. This is clearly illustrated in the last section of Book I of the *Treatise*, when Hume explains the way he intends to practice philosophy after going through his skeptical crisis:

At the time, therefore, that I am tir'd with amusement and company, and have indulg'd a *reverie* in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation (THN I.4.7.12, SBN 270).

This passage shows an exercise in true moral experimental philosophy. The philosopher takes part in the conversable world and then seeks for a moment in solitude to gain the necessary distance to reflect about what she has experienced in the course of social interaction. This momentary isolation does not lead to chimerical conclusions, because it is not a permanent state and the reflective attitude it fosters is inspired by common life and conversation. The proper task for the philosopher is to enquire into the principles that lead people to “approve of

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<sup>17</sup> Watkins (2019: 229-236) distinguishes several ways in which moderate detachment should be performed. These concern distancing from our subject of inquiry –our social and natural environment–, our own cognitive faculties, our own judgments, and philosophical and political factions.

one object and disapprove of another, call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd, decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly" (THN I.4.7.12, SBN 271), that is, to establish the general maxims that lay the foundation of the science of human nature. This foundation does not lie in abstract reasoning, but is drawn from observation of the conversable world (see THN Intro 10, SBN xix).

## 2.1 The Anatomist and the Painter

It has been suggested that the distinction between learned and conversable worlds is equivalent to the difference Hume delineates between 'two species of philosophy': namely, anatomy and painting (Michaud 1983: 28-29, Groulez 2005: 57, Calvo de Saavedra 2012: 173 n44). I believe this equivalence does not stand because while the latter concerns two conceptions of philosophy, the former is more extensive and complies with two realms of human activity (Pomeroy 1986: 374, 388). In any case, the difference between the anatomist and the painter should be placed within the learned world, but bearing in mind that Hume proposes the philosopher to bridge between her 'native' place and the conversable world. Much has been discussed about the meaning of the anatomist/painter distinction and its role in Hume's philosophy.<sup>18</sup> I will restrict myself to a few remarks regarding its connection with the philosopher's identity as a mediator.

The distinction appears in the closing paragraph of the *Treatise*<sup>9</sup>, where Hume defines his work as philosophical anatomy, meaning it is an accurate, rigorous, abstract and

<sup>18</sup> A critical overview of this debate can be found in Abramson (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Hume first invoked the question in a 1739 letter to Hutcheson (L 1.32).

detailed description of the principles of human nature (see THN 3.3.6.6, SBN 621; EHU 1.8). He contrasts it to philosophical painting, which consists in practical morality, whose aim is to reform the conduct of men and bring them near to an ideal of virtue (see THN 3.3.6.6, SBN 621; EHU 1.3). Not only the purposes of anatomy and painting diverge, but they also employ different methods and writing styles, have different justification and intended audiences (Immerwahr 1991: 5-6; Abramson 2007). Even though Hume clearly states in the *Treatise* that the anatomist “ought not to emulate the painter” (THN 3.3.6.6, SBN 620), in the first *Enquiry* he suggests that it would be positive to “unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy” (EHU 1.17). These two statements have raised a number of scholarly debates concerning whether Hume’s intentions are to remain being an anatomist or encourage some kind of reconciliation between both ways of philosophizing. I am not going to engage in this debate, but it is clear that Hume considers anatomy and painting can be complementary with mutual advantage (Calvo de Saavedra 2012: 222-236, Costelloe 2018: 264).<sup>20</sup> In the *Treatise*, he suggests that the anatomist can give advice to the painter providing a solid foundation to its precepts and reasonings, and in the first *Enquiry*, he adds that painting can offer clearness and novelty to anatomy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in the 1739 letter to Hutcheson, even though Hume states that “I cannot easily conceive these two characters united in the same work,” he adds: “I intend to make a new trial, if it be possible to make the metaphysician and the moralist agree a little better” (L 1.33). Hume relates philosophical anatomy to metaphysics in EHU 1.7-8.

<sup>21</sup> Calvo de Saavedra suggests that in the first *Enquiry* Hume argues that this alliance between the anatomist and the painter is necessary to counteract the influence of superstition in the conversable world. Combining the qualities of anatomy and painting allows the true

What I wish to emphasize concerning the distinction between anatomy and painting is that the philosopher's identity Hume delineates in "Of Essay-Writing" should not be classified simply as philosophical painting. Hume is not arguing that philosophical activity should be restricted to practical morality. He does not describe the ambassador as a learned person who offers precepts and examples for a virtuous life, or looks for an immediate influence over people's conduct by appealing to their sentiments. I believe Hume is pointing out to something different, aiming at a radical modification in the established understanding of what a philosopher should be. His message is that the philosopher can be either an anatomist or a painter, but this choice should not imply in any case seclusion. We must remember Hume says that the materials for philosophizing should be provided by the conversable world, which entails the philosopher's direct contact with the social realm by means of being part of it. This implies that she must draw her principles for explaining human nature and her standards of virtue from the conversable world, rather than produce them by means of abstract and hypothetical reasoning. Furthermore, one can attempt to combine anatomy and painting, and the recommendation will remain the same: philosophy, whatever the kind, "may have a direct reference to action and society" (EHU I.6).

### 3. Conclusion

The distinctions I have just analysed outlines what Hume may have had in mind when conceiving and talking about the

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philosopher to develop means of communication closer to conversation, thus collaborating in the refinement of taste, the understanding and sentiments of the vulgar (2012: 261).

true philosopher's identity. While the first one shows that the philosophical attitude is transitory and alternates with the vulgar one, the second presents two separate worlds and emphasizes the need to communicate them through the figure of the mediator. I suggest these distinctions are separate dimensions that may be taken into account in order to understand the way Hume conceives philosophical activity. But we should be provided against the temptation of merely associate the conversable world with the pre-reflective attitude and the learned with the reflective one. I believe Hume is not stating that the realm of action is intrinsically pre-reflective, because at the beginning of "Of Essay-Writing" he says that members of both learned and conversable worlds "engage themselves in the operations of the mind." While the distinction between these worlds aims at describing different activities, the distinction between reflectivity and pre-reflectivity expresses different attitudes towards our experience, attitudes that both learned and active people assume at different times. The philosopher who remains locked down in her cabinet, apart from the conversable world, seems to want to perpetuate the reflective bent, but her effort does not yield any positive results either for the development of philosophy or society, not even for her own mental health: she ends up producing chimerical knowledge and affected by melancholy, which, as a whole, results in false philosophy.

It is true that the learned person is engaged most of the time with higher and more difficult mental operations than the active one. This requires moderate detachment not only due to the mental effort it demands, but also to better understand her subject of enquiry. An expert in a different occupation, such as the clock maker, may require the first type of distancing but not the second, because she does not study human nature. But the point is that, unlike the clock

maker, when the philosopher isolates herself from the world, with that gesture she seems to exclusively endow herself with the ability to reflect. The image of the philosopher as an expert, who is on an equal footing with any expert in other fields of learning and action comes to demystify this assumption. The image of the philosopher as a mediator between learned and conversable worlds urges us to dispel the aura of superiority that usually surrounds philosophical activity.

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