

University of Nevada, Reno

Hume's Theory of Human Nature—A Mild Tragedy

The Role of Custom and its Inescapably Negative Effects

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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by

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Abstract

It is common for philosophers to reject thinking based on custom—from habits and education—as it is seen to be variable between different individuals and groups, thus leading to conflict and confusion. Instead they prefer thinking based on a faculty of reason, which appeals to universal truths. David Hume, however, argues that all thinking is based on custom, including what we call reason, though he does not deny that it produces negative effects that lead to confused thought. For him, this inherent confusion makes the human condition “whimsical”, but I argue that things are worse. As Hume explains, tyrants and knaves are able to take advantage of custom’s negative effects in order to commit their crimes and cause people pain. Though we are able to counter some of their actions through reflection and re-observance of reality, this is not enough to avoid the pain brought upon us by these criminals. As a result, Hume’s theory of human nature is a mild tragedy, where the principle by which we are able to think also leads to painful circumstances, softened only slightly by reflection and review.

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Introduction

a. Custom and Philosophy

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines custom as “A habitual or usual practice; common way of acting; usage, fashion, habit (either of an individual or of a community).” As such, custom pervades human life and activity, and undoubtedly, our individual habits and the influence of our education—from parents, formal schooling, and elsewhere—lead us to think and act in a certain way. Such a definition as above makes custom seem a broad concept and it has received wide treatment in the history of philosophy because of its extensive relevance. In the work of David Hume, custom is composed of individual habits and education received from others through testimony. Thus, custom is variable and sways people (and peoples) in different ways, because our habits and educations are variable. This has the potential to spark conflict because the ideas from custom which shape our deeply held views (in religion, politics, morality, and so on) are different, and we disagree about important matters in the world.

Interrelated with habit and education, abstract ideas and general rules are also integral to the composition of custom in Hume’s work. With the ideas we gain from habits, we form abstract ideas to which we attach terms, thereby giving our particular ideas from experience a more general signification. We are then able to put our ideas into words, making education, and testimony in general, possible. As we will see, the formation of abstract ideas is also integral to the conflicts inherent

within custom because the process by which they are formed can create confusion in conversation.

General rules disseminate what is learned from custom. From our habits and education we form rules which we can then apply to future experience. All humans—from the vulgar to the learned—form and follow rules for the sake of survival and prosperity, and we will see that it is only possible to correct a flawed general rule by replacing it with another general rule. In the end, we are all determined, however, to follow some of the unreflected upon rules of the vulgar, which are sometimes incorrect, rather than the preferred ones of the wise man, based on reflection.

Because of the variation and subsequent conflict which inevitably exists between the customs among individuals and different peoples, custom is mostly rejected in philosophy as the source of any kind of acceptable truth. Furthermore, it is often thought that our customary orientations distort what would otherwise be a pure, clear view of the laws of nature and morality; John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* said, “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement” (126). Thus, it is a familiar task for philosophers to present and argue for theories which use a purportedly stable criterion of truth, meant to ward off the distorting effects of custom. Different from these philosophers, however, David Hume concluded that “all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom” (Hume, *Treatise* 149). This first essay will discuss the relation between

reason and custom, first in some examples from the history of philosophy, and then as Hume sees the relation.

Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes both recognized this issue in their presentations of the new science early in the 17th century. Their goal was to present a scientific method which would assure certainty in its results. For Bacon, whom Hume affectionately refers to as “*my Lord Bacon*” and considers “the father of experimental physicks” (Hume, *Treatise* 646), the method was one of close observation of nature and induction; his method “derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way” (Bacon 12-13), he says. Thus he trusts his senses, albeit with the aid of instruments, and thinks that from sense perception we can safely induce truths about nature. But this is not a method devoid of complications, he recognizes; it gives entrance to truth, but “even after entrance is obtained” (Bacon 17), there are “idols and false notions”—some of which are like custom as Hume sees it—which “beset men’s minds”, leading them away from the truth. Bacon proposes that by making these idols clear, scientists will be able to “fortify themselves as far as may be against their assaults.” In other words, he places his method as directly opposed to these idols and custom. For example, the idols of the cave refer to the supposed certainty men feel from their own habits and education, but which is “variable, confused and actuated as it were by chance” (Bacon 18). This, we shall see, is similar to what Hume thinks of habit

and education—it is a source of certainty but is variable and sometimes mistaken. Also, the idols of the marketplace are formed in “the intercourse and society of man with man” (Bacon 19), where their discourse leads them to understand notions according to the way that other men speak of them, rather than as nature would have it. This way in which men’s discourse about nature may differ from the truth is similar to what we will discuss with the effects of testimony in Hume’s work. By recognizing and actively attempting to avoid these idols, Bacon supposes that scientists will be able to bring certain conclusions regarding nature’s secrets to their fields.

René Descartes, in introducing his method, draws a distinct line between “reason” and “custom”, preferring his own reason to any truth introduced by custom. He says,

It is true that so long as I merely considered the customs of other men, I found hardly anything there about which to be confident, and that I noticed there was about as much diversity as I had previously found among the opinions of the philosophers. Thus the greatest profit I derived from this was that, on seeing many things that, although they seem to us very extravagant and ridiculous, do not cease to be commonly accepted and approved among other great peoples, I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom; and thus I gradually freed myself from many errors that can darken our natural light and render us less able to listen to reason. (Descartes 10)

Descartes sees diversity among customary opinions, and he claims to have found a method for eradicating the uncertainties within one’s own understanding. He proposes that by using our reason we ought to remove any idea whose truth we

doubt and instead only assent to those ideas which are clear and distinct in form. As such, all ideas in one's mind, if they are at all dubitable or uncertain, are to be discarded in favor of those clear and distinct ideas which the intellect takes as true. Because the intellect is given by God and our idea of God is clear and distinct, he asserts that those ideas which take the same form as our idea of God must be true and detectable as such by the intellect. Thus, Descartes intends his method to separate truths of reason, created by God, from those of custom, created by imperfect humans, through reflection upon one's own ideas and only assenting to those which present themselves as clear and distinct.

Regarding moral matters, Descartes presents a "provisional code of morals" (Descartes 22) in *Discourse on Method*, imploring his readers to follow the customary moral code of their country; he says, "in moral matters one must sometimes follow opinions that one knows are quite uncertain, just as if they were indubitable" (Descartes 31). While we cannot know what Descartes' full ethical theory would have said, we still might assume that, had it been similar to his epistemological theory, moral beauty would be something detectable by the intellect, after denying imperfect moral ideas provided by custom. However, we might also take his approval of the laws and customs of one's country as a tacit acceptance of a view such as Hume's, which places custom as precedent to reason, at least in moral matters. Descartes seems to be saying that because of the pace with which we must reason, "when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we ought to follow the most probable" (Descartes 25), making reliance

on custom essential. Here we find that even our quintessential rationalist, Descartes, gives us reason to pay attention to the role of custom in our practical life, rather than merely ignoring it as an unreliable source of truth.

The most famous philosopher to strongly distinguish between custom and reason in morality is Plato. Plato places Socrates in conversation with Greeks who hold different views, which are apparently wrong or worthy of observation for various reasons. When discussing right action, the interlocutor represents a view of what is customarily correct, but Socrates' goal is to introduce his interlocutor to the eternal ideas, to which all truths in the temporal realm refer. He shows that customary knowledge, or opinion, reaches for an account related to a Form, but that it is at best lucky if it achieves it. However, if by using reason one attains a complete grasp of the form of the good, one will then lead a life in line with the good, which is relevant regardless of time or place, marking a distinct boundary between the good presented by custom and that presented by one's reason. In modern times, this view is akin to that put forth by Lord Shaftesbury in his writings; though he would be a major influence on Hume with his idea that morality is based on sentiment, he also claims goodness to be something eternal and immutable. He argues, as Michael Gill writes, that if customary opinion were to approve of vicious action, then that action could not be considered "good" or "virtuous" (Gill).

b. Hume on Custom

Contrary to the above thinkers (except for perhaps Plato, who also seems to recognize that most people will not ascend to the point of being able to grasp the Forms), David Hume declares “all reasonings to be nothing but the effect of custom” (Hume, *Treatise* 149). When he says, “all reasonings,” he means all reasonings which concern matters of fact and not those which concern relations of ideas. These latter reasonings are “the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain” (Hume, *Enquiries* 25). These analytic problems are solved merely by the mind, in the case of demonstration, or by the senses, in intuition; they are the problems in which knowledge is achieved, according to Hume. Matters of fact, however, do not enjoy such certainty as can be concluded in the above areas. A conclusion in arithmetic, for instance, cannot be contradicted without violating a logical truth; a conclusion contradictory to some matter of fact, on the other hand, does not imply logical contradiction. One of Hume’s examples for this claim is that it is not contradictory to proclaim something like “*the sun will not rise to-morrow*” (Hume, *Enquiries* 26), though we find it absurd in everyday life to assert such a thing.

It is Hume’s project to find what it is that makes us believe that any matter of fact will remain true for the future, as it has been experienced in the past, and

he concludes that it is custom; “Objects have no discoverable connexion together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another” (Hume, *Treatise* 103). Thus, for Hume, humans reason upon matters of fact—whose certainty is believed and not known—based on custom; reason and custom are at bottom inseparable, according to Hume, in direct contradiction to the suppositions of Bacon, Descartes, Plato (maybe), and Lord Shaftesbury.

In order to fully demonstrate the meaning of this claim that “all reasonings are nothing but the effect of custom,” it will first be necessary to discuss just what custom is for Hume; I will discuss a number of points I have gathered from various parts of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiries* in which he speaks of the aspects of custom. We will find that custom is the principle upon which we are able to infer the existence of one object from the appearance of another, despite there not being a perceptible connection between them. For Hume, the impressions and ideas from our senses and memory compose a system referred to as “*reality*” (Hume, *Treatise* 108). Through experience we have impressions of objects which are copied into ideas; we then have emotions—attractions and aversions—related to those objects. Connected to this *reality* in the mind is another system of ideas based in custom or the relation of cause and effect (they are the same) and this the mind “likewise dignifies with the title of *realities*” (Hume, *Treatise* 108). Some ideas from this latter system, as we will see, are not the

product of the memory; they are created in the imagination or placed in the mind directly through another's testimony, and thus do not originate with the senses. Hume says, "Tis this latter principle, which peoples the world, and brings us acquainted with such existences, as by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the senses and memory" (Hume, *Treatise* 108). Thus it is the basis for our being able to believe in realities of which we have had no experience, which for most purposes is a necessary ability.

Custom is formed, Hume says, "after two several ways" (Hume, *Treatise* 115), habit and education; I add that the formation of abstract ideas, discussed by Hume in Book 1, Part 1 of the *Treatise*, is just as central as either of the two above ways in the formation of custom. Hume does not explain how custom, in general, is caused, but by considering each of its components in Hume's explanations as they would relate to each other in the human experience, I offer a view of how custom is formed and employed in human life. In Hume's work, a habit is formed in the experience of repetitive phenomena; we experience the sun coming up every morning and conclude as the result of this that it will come up tomorrow. As I see it, it is from this habit that we develop an idea and abstract it from our particular experience. We then annex a term or a phrase to that idea, and are able to converse and reflect upon our experience, without having to be in the throes of that sensory experience at that very time. I can thus say, "The sun will rise tomorrow," with a feeling of certainty, though that is not something I have yet

experienced. With that ability to reflect and converse, education, understood broadly as any idea given to us through the words of another person, is made possible; one is able to relate testimony to others about happenings, give advice, instruction, warnings, praise or condemnation, as a teacher does—in a formal school setting or informally in everyday situations. Thus, custom is formed by a process that starts with habit, allowing us to form abstract ideas, which then allow us to converse, for the purposes of education.

Then, we make and are taught general rules, which are produced by custom as tools for guiding one's action and reasoning regarding anything in life. They have the form of a rule, such as, "The sun will rise tomorrow," or, "Honesty is the best policy." Hume merely says that general rules proceed from the same principles as custom, so it seems to me that general rules are formed and propagated based on ideas our habits and educations have given us. This is to say that we form general rules based on our particular experience, and we also receive them from other people as advice, guidance, instruction, and so on. When we follow general rules they give us assurance that matters of fact will be the same as they were in the past so that we may move on to others. For example, we make a rule that the sun will rise tomorrow based on having seen it happen every day in the past; we are then able, for instance, to plan for breakfast, get to work in the car, open the office door, and so on, able to assume that the eggs will crack as normal, the car will start without problems, and the key to the office will function

correctly, even though there is no experienced assurance that any of these will happen as they had in the past. It is with a general rule, oftentimes not articulated but nonetheless articulable, that we are allowed to go through our day assuming that things will happen as they did in the past.

We will find with each of the above interrelated aspects of custom—habit, education, abstract ideas, and general rules—that, while making reasoning about the natural and moral worlds possible, custom also produces negative effects. This is so because in each of the aspects of custom we develop ideas, taken as realities, to which there is no correspondent impression—and Hume suggests that we reject ideas which lack a corresponding impression (Hume, *Enquiries* 22). Thus, our ideas from custom are susceptible to error because they do not have correspondent impressions, yet they play an integral role in the successful carrying out of our lives. For, without customary associations between our ideas, we would be left entirely to survive by our unaided memory and senses, which do not thus inform us of cause and effect relations by means of an impression of necessary connection. The abstraction from our immediate sensory experience in the present, which allows us to remember the past and calculate for the future, would not exist¹.

Thus custom gives us the means to survive and flourish as humans. It gives us a sense that we belong to the world we live in: our ideas of ourselves and nature, when they are in direct correspondence with reality, are understood and embraced, making the world a home. But by supplying us with ideas of nature

which precede and then govern our interpretation of our sensible perceptions, our reliance on custom puts us in a position to mistakenly conceive reality, and sometimes to detrimental effect. This is shown by Hume when he discusses general rules and the ambiguity they present in viewing situations. As seen with the example of the man in the iron cage overhanging a precipice, there are always at least two general rules with which to understand a particular situation: that of the vulgar and that of the wise man. The vulgar unreflectively follow the rule which most easily carries away their imagination, resulting in mistaken reasoning. In this case, the man in the iron cage prematurely fears the precipice, based on the rule that precipices are dangerous. The wise man, however, reflects upon the situation, because he understands first judgments to be fallible, due to the experience of them having been so in the past. He reviews the evidence available for forming a judgment, and in this case would find that the iron's sturdiness will keep him safe, and there is no need to tremble. He thus replaces the first rule with another rule, which takes into account alternate probabilities from what was first thought. As we will see, this example makes a useful analogy with which to assess Hume's examples of the tyrannical leader and sensible knave. It is these examples that, it seems to me, give us a tangible idea of custom's negative effects.

c. Custom's Negative Effects

At the same time that custom and the general rules bred from it give us a means of thinking about the world, Hume shows us that custom produces negative effects. I think that these effects are what then allow tyrants and knaves to find success, leading to pain for those they affect. In the example of the tyrannical leader, the leader takes advantage of his people's trust in him, based on their following the rule that political leaders are protectors. He then uses that power to oppress his people, for the sake of his personal gain. Thus the tyrant appears to be protecting his people, but, because of the nature of custom and general rules, he is able to maintain this appearance while at the same time doing the opposite, in reality. Just as the man in the iron cage makes the incorrect judgment that he is in danger despite the sturdiness of the cage, so do people trust their leader based on their first judgment. If they reflected on their first judgment and reviewed the sensible basis of it, they might find that the leader is oppressing them. The sensible knave, similar to the tyrant, creates the appearance that he is to be trusted, but in reality he takes advantage of exceptions to general rules to increase his personal fortune. He thus takes advantage of people's first judgment that others are trustworthy, when they should judge him as a pernicious member of society.

Both of these figures undermine the strength of society, which is necessary to human flourishing. By taking advantage of the various flaws in custom—we overlook the fact that ideas from habit are such because habit is self-concealing,

we trust false testimony based on education because of a tendency to believe others, we only partially consider circumstances and merely annex terms to abstract ideas, and finally, can understand a given situation in multiple, oftentimes conflicting, ways due to the influence of general rules, such as with satirical language and the covering up of incriminating evidence—tyrants and knaves create the appearance that everything is all right. But when they are discovered, reality is proven to be something other than most people’s idea of it. This can create an experience of pain and alienation for those affected by their deceit, where the customary way of thinking about the world, because it is false, is not acceptable and must be realigned with reality as observed. The wise man’s reflection will serve as the tool we need to remove our minds from their trains of thought in the imagination to reviewing reality and replacing our first judgment with one closer to the truth, which then allows us to see the tyrant and the knave as pernicious individuals in society. In the end, however, we will see that not even the wise man can always resist following the vulgar rules and that even he must cease reflection in his active life, retaining a general susceptibility to error in human understanding.

Seen in the light of custom’s negative effects, Hume’s theory of human nature leaves humans in a situation where the principle by which we come to understand the world is the same by which we become confused and out of touch². Our views of nature rely on our ideas from both *reality* and *realities*, but some of the latter’s ideas lack correspondence with a reliable impression, meaning that we

have ideas whose basis is tenuous and unclear. Our ideas about the future, which we gain from habit, are unsupported by impressions of future states of affairs, making them empty. Also, the ideas we receive from other people, though we think they reference impressions that they once had, may instead reference fantasies. As such, the ideas from custom which compose *realities* and “people the world” are susceptible to errors and mistakes, which create opportunities for tyrants and knaves to act unjustly. Many of the ideas from custom are useful—they can have the effect of making human life better; but they can also produce negative, unhappy circumstances. Thus, reasoning based on custom is at once the means of humans’ flourishing and detriment.

So, we see that Hume has found a positive role for custom in human life. Philosophers such as Bacon, Descartes, Plato, and Lord Shaftesbury devised methods to combat the ambiguous nature of it, but Hume argues that it is the basis of our being able to think at all and thus ought not to be discredited by philosophers. But even as Hume portrays custom, we have reason to believe it is not all good. He concludes that it leaves human nature in a “whimsical condition” (E 128), but I think, with the examples of the tyrannical leader and the sensible knave, the negative side of custom can lead to tragedy. Because of custom, these characters have the ability to undermine society, which is humans’ best means of personal protection and general prosperity. And Hume’s best method of recourse against them—that of doubting our first judgment, reviewing the situation, and judging anew—is less than satisfactory in helping us escape tyrants and knaves.

Thus, where Hume sees the human condition as merely “whimsical”, I say it is worse, based on what Hume has offered.

I think Hume’s theory depicts a tragic view of human nature. By this, I mean that the protagonist here, the human being in general, possesses traits that are consistent with a protagonist in a work of tragedy. As Susan Feagin writes in her *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article, “A persistent though not universal feature [in tragedy] is a protagonist who comes to a catastrophic end, bringing others down in the process.” It seems to me that Hume thinks tyrants and knaves are a necessary possibility in the human experience. Their presence indicates that catastrophic consequences from their actions are, in some degree, an unavoidable prospect. They oppress and steal, and yet we must accept the possibility of their presence because not even our best means of eradicating that possibility are sufficient. The wise man’s reflection serves to consider the possibility, and this can reduce the pain caused by tyrants and knaves, making the tragic effects mild. But the wise man must cease reflection at some point if he wishes to be active in society, and opportunities for tyrants and knaves remain. Therefore, Hume’s “way of seeing the world” (Feagin) in his theory of human nature, I think, results in a mild tragedy.

To recap, I have a few tasks to complete in this paper: first, I will explain what role custom plays in Hume’s idea of human nature; then, I will explain what custom is by way of explaining habit, abstract ideas, education, and general rules. Following this, I will discuss Hume’s own examples which seem to point to this

idea of human nature as fundamentally tragic—those of the tyrannical leader and the sensible knave—and I will explain in what manner custom allows them to take advantage of society for their own selfish ends. We will then see how the wise man's reflection leads him to doubt a commonly accepted general rule and observe situations anew, though he too cannot avoid using rules unreflectively in his active life. In the end, we will see that these circumstances created by custom are both the only means by which we have ideas of nature and society and can thus survive and flourish as humans, and the means by which we become confused, allowing others to take advantage of us. As we will see, in fact, not even the tyrant or the knave is clear from custom's snare.

1. Custom

First, it will be necessary to explain what custom is for. Hume sees custom as the basis for reasoning about matters of fact, which encompass causal relations and moral matters. He comes to this conclusion after analyzing established views on how our ideas of causality and morality come about. For Hume, the measure of our ideas' clarity is determined by their being based on a sense impression or not. Our ideas, in both form and content, must be retraceable to a sense impression if we are to accept them; if there is no correspondent impression, then we are to be critical of that idea because it is empty, not having any basis in sensible reality³. Thus, the claim that there is an observable necessary connection between causes and effects is untenable, according to Hume. He explains that in any succession of events, where one object precedes the existence of another, no third object, namely, their necessary connection, ever appears to the senses; and, as a causal relation is characterized primarily by its being necessary, this poses a *prima facie* problem for asserting causal relations. For example, the sun has risen every morning every day of my life, but those thousands of occurrences of the same succession of events determine my understanding of what *will* happen as much as one single occurrence of the succession would have; the repeated experience offers no more to the mind than a single experiment. That the sun will rise tomorrow is no more certain than that it will not, and if we stick with the criterion of truth provided by Hume—that ideas are copies of sense impressions—then it follows

that the idea of necessary connection between “the sun rising” and “tomorrow” is one we ought to be suspicious of.

By following the criterion that every idea must be derived from a sense impression, we are unable to find the ground upon which matters of fact find their certainty. Furthermore, no traditional means of declaring a causal relation, especially in regard to its being necessary, which all causal relations must be, work either. That an object is necessarily caused is not a detectable quality in it, for no single quality belongs universally to all objects, such that we would perceive a “having been caused” quality in them. Rather, necessity is something to be detected in the relation between objects, but this is something neither intuitively nor logically ascertainable. We cannot intuit the relation because at a particular time, not both objects, one the cause and the other the effect, are present.⁴ Only one or the other is present to our senses, and thus the relation is intuitively unavailable. We cannot logically demonstrate the relation, especially as Hobbes, Clarke, and Locke thought they had. Each of their attempted demonstrations, as Hume shows, presupposed that all objects are caused; this, obviously, is circular and unacceptable. Thus, after explaining that these means of explaining necessary connection with regard to causes and effects are impotent in showing how necessary connection is possible, Hume posits that custom, composed of our habits and education, makes us feel as if events in constant conjunction with one another are actually connected in nature.

In the following sections, we will discuss the interrelated parts which compose custom. Custom, in general, is our means of thinking about nature, morality, politics, and so on. It is primarily composed of habit⁵ and education. Habits are formed in one's first-hand sensible experience with the world. Abstract ideas are formed from ideas that originated in habit, and by annexing them to a term, education (taken broadly as anything learned second-hand from another person's words) is made possible. In other words, if we were unable to put our first-hand experience in words, we would be unable to converse, educate, and be educated; so, the formation of abstract ideas makes education possible, and is thus necessary to the formation of custom. Finally, general rules are formed based on what we gain from custom and guide our action by giving us a basis for making judgments about reality.

2. Habit

Regarding causal relations, Hume thinks that his explanation for why we think there to be a necessary connection between any cause and effect is simpler than the traditional explanations. For him, it is a habitual way of viewing nature that leads us to posit a necessary connection between cause and effect. Upon the experience of the constant conjunction of two resembling and contiguous events—for example, a flame and the resulting heat—we “without any farther ceremony, call the one *cause* and the other *effect*” (Hume, *Treatise* 87). The repetition of impressions of the two events produces an idea in the imagination that those events are connected in nature, though such a sense impression is never admitted. Hume says, “Tho’ an idle fiction has no efficacy, yet we find by experience, that the idea of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the same effect with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception” (Hume, *Treatise* 119), which is to say that, though the idea of the connection between objects in a causal relation is an idea without a correspondent impression, still it is an idea which we treat like an impression and take for granted. The more we experience that conjunction of events, the more strongly is the idea of their connection reinforced, even though in essence, seeing the same event occur a thousand times introduces no more to the mind than seeing that event once does. Thus, the upshot here is that our minds create the idea of necessary connection; it is not something that we experience through our senses.

Furthermore, even if we have not had much experience with a relation, we presume there to be a necessary connection between the events based on the idea “*that like objects, plac’d in like circumstances, will always produce like effects*” (Hume, *Treatise* 105). Thus our habits dictate to us broader realities than our own particular experience affords. And if we experience events contrary to what we expect—if, for instance, a flame fails to cause heat—then this does not completely debunk the efficacy of that habit. Instead, we presume there to be some contrary cause which we had not yet accounted for and expect the effect to occur proportionally to how we experienced it in the past. For example, if a flame produces heat nine of ten times in our experience, then we will expect flames to produce heat ninety percent of the time in the future. Therefore, our habits are stabilized so that our limited experience will still provide us with a basis for reasoning.

This way of looking at the causal relation has the result of making “all probable reasoning [about matters of fact] nothing but a species of sensation” (Hume, *Treatise* 103). Thus reason is made by Hume subservient to sensation, in that we would have nothing to reason upon without experience. Where no other basis is found for seeing necessary connection between events, our own personal experience of repetitive events provides that basis. We assent to our beliefs regarding causal relations based on our own taste, just as in “poetry and music” (Hume, *Treatise* 103), as Hume provocatively asserts, even though we might think

of our assent as intellectual or rational, appealing to a universal standard, as a rationalist such as Descartes did.

This susceptibility of ours to think we are using our intellect, which assents to universal truths—again, as Descartes did—when in fact we are following our particular taste and sentiment, is the result of habit’s self-effacing nature. Our habits cause us to expect nature to be as we experienced it before, but without reflecting on the fact that the expectation is based only on particular past experience. The habit becomes so strong that we proceed to act on it before realizing its basis is such. Thus, our expectation of what the future will be like is not the result of reflection; rather, custom operates on the mind in an “insensible manner” (Hume, *Treatise* 103) and “before we have time for reflexion” (Hume, *Treatise* 104). This is exemplified by the person who already knows that falling into a swift river has a high probability of resulting in drowning without having to reflect on the scene before arriving at that conclusion.

“Such is the influence of custom, that, where it is strongest, it not only covers our natural ignorance, but even conceals itself, and seems not to take place...” (Hume, *Enquiries* 28-9). Thus, it seems that Hume would say that when one asserts that there is a necessary connection between a cause and effect, one is basing her claim on the habit of having seen events constantly conjoined and then, as a result of custom, thinking that those events are connected in nature. In fact, however, it is a mere operation of the mind that makes one assume that the future will be like the past—this habit “covers our natural ignorance”. This strong

influence of habit prevents us from seeing that our reasoning is based on particular experience, making the conclusion that an idea of necessary connection references a universal truth, devoid of any particular emotion or feeling pertaining to that idea, easier to form. In other words, our personal habits are less detectable to us when they are strongest, resulting in mistaken reasoning when our habitual way of seeing things is wrong.

This concealment of custom, in habit, but also in forming abstract ideas and education, is a theme crucial to a full understanding of the role of custom in Hume's work. Custom, through habit, gives us the idea that things are really connected in nature when in fact it is the mind that supplies us with that appearance. As we see here, making connections, if only in the imagination, is a useful function of the mind; for without any conception of connections in reality, we would be left to wonder constantly about such things as the sun rising tomorrow and the result of turning the key in a vehicle's ignition. But the concealment of our habits gives us the potentially false idea that the observable world really is as we think it is, when there are no strong guarantees of such. Thus, our ideas carry the inherent risk of being mistaken; our understanding places us in a tragic position in relation to nature, because the means by which we reason at the same time covers up its own mistakes, and at times, this can have a detrimental effect on our well-being.

Habit is the first step in the formation of custom in Hume's work. In the experience of events constantly conjoined, there is created in the imagination an

idea that those events are connected in nature.⁶ The more resembling, contiguous, and constantly conjoined events are repeated in experience, the stronger the propensity to conclude the existence of one object from the appearance of another becomes. And even when we have not experienced a particular conjunction of events, or if we experience an effect, for instance, which is contrary to our past experience, our habits prevail and continue to guide us in life. Thus our reasoning about matters of fact is based on a feeling, but this feeling is covered up in our reasoning based on our habits, and the stronger the habit, the less evident it is that we are reasoning based on habit. This allows us to think that we are not merely relying on personal habit and instead appealing to universal truths, even though, as Hume says, reason here is the same as a feeling. It seems to me that this discussion of habit explains our personal reasons for expecting events to happen just as they did in the past. As of yet this discussion has not, however, explained how we come to be able to speak of those expectations, nor does it explain how we reason about things of which we have had no experience—for instance, how we reason about historical events or events on the other side of the world.

3. Abstract Ideas

It seems to me that thinking and speaking of things of which we have had little to no experience is first made possible by the formation of abstract, general ideas, as Hume explains early in the *Treatise*. By putting experience into words, we can converse and relate events to people who did not themselves see those events happen, and we ourselves become privy to historical events and events in different parts of the world. By considering Hume's discussion of abstract ideas and how we annex terms to these ideas, we see the means by which we have newspapers, religious texts, novels, speeches, and so on, because these use words to convey events which otherwise would not be available to most people. In this way, abstract ideas facilitate and make possible education and general rules, because these need to be articulable. It is this generalness of abstract ideas which, however, makes them "imperfect" (Hume, *Treatise* 18), leading to "inconveniences" (Hume, *Treatise* 21), because we can only partially consider all possible ideas—because we have only our own particular experience—to which the words used by others in speeches or texts refer. It is thus possible that our particular idea is different from that particular idea referred to by the writer or testifier, and we therefore are liable to flawed conceptions when using abstract ideas conveyed to us by other people. This partial consideration of all possible ideas to which a general term may refer will figure prominently in the argument that custom produces negative effects.

Following Berkeley, Hume says, "all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification,

and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them” (Hume, *Treatise* 17). Hume is at bottom saying that all ideas are particular, having been copied from a particular sense impression—finite in nature; but by giving them a term, we treat them as general and as accounting for the entire stock of objects to which that general term can refer.⁷ To prove that all abstract ideas are in themselves particular, but general in their representation, we first reject any argument that an abstract idea can be of an object in all its possible degrees, because that would presume an infinite capacity of the mind, which is absurd. Then, Hume will show that an abstract idea is not of an object devoid of any degrees of quality and quantity, because it is impossible to form an idea of an object without forming a precise notion of its degrees of quality or quantity (Hume, *Treatise* 18).

First, objects are indistinguishable from their qualities and quantities, and there is no separation of an object from its qualities and quantities in abstraction; for example, “the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself” (Hume, *Treatise* 18-19) in our conception of it. Thus, the general idea of a line “has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality; however it may be made to represent others, which have different degrees of both” (Hume, *Treatise* 19). Second, our sense impressions of objects come upon the mind in their precise degrees of quality and quantity, which are then copied into our ideas. It is in the force and vivacity of an idea, transferred from an impression, that the precise degrees of the object are clear; an idea of an object

without precise degrees of quality and quantity lacks the force and vivacity which would come from an impression, making it liable to error in one's use of it.⁸ Finally, as "everything in nature is individual" (Hume, *Treatise* 19) and everything supposed to exist exists in its precise degrees of quality and quantity, it is absurd to declare an idea without precise degrees of quantity and quality to exist when there is no such object from which it would be copied in nature. Therefore, an abstract idea, because it is of an impression which is precise in its degrees of quality and quantity, is a particular idea which becomes general in its representation, and is applied "as if it were universal" (Hume, *Treatise* 20). Though we are unable to experience all the particular degrees of quality and quantity of an object to which its general idea can refer "we can at once form a notion of all possible degrees of quantity and quality, in such a manner at least, as, however imperfect, may serve all the purposes of reflexion and conversation" (Hume, *Treatise* 18).

It is by this process of "annexing" terms to ideas abstracted from their objects that we are then able to reflect and converse, and then perform all the tasks related to them of which the human world is composed. The ability to form abstract ideas, therefore, empowers humans to discuss their experiences, as well as build knowledge. However, by saying that the particular idea is applied *as if* it were universal, Hume implies that it is not general, but we take it for granted that it is—though we may not conceive the process as such—because it "serves the purposes of life" (Hume, *Treatise* 20). It seems that because our experience as individuals is limited and we cannot have experienced an object in all its possible degrees of

quality and quantity—i.e., we are, as human beings, limited in time and in space—it is not possible for even our most general ideas to wholly encompass all the particulars to which they could refer. We thus collect all those possible degrees of an object which we *have* experienced in “an imperfect manner” (Hume, *Treatise* 20) because it is the best we can do; “...as the production of all the ideas, to which the name may be apply’d, is in most cases impossible, we abridge that work by a more partial consideration, and find but few inconveniences to arise in our reasoning from that abridgment” (Hume, *Treatise* 21). We partially consider those possible degrees of resembling objects which we have ourselves experienced—because it is all we have to consider—and then in applying general ideas, we inevitably apply them “beyond their nature” (Hume, *Treatise* 20).

In conversation, when another person utters a word, it revives all the particular ideas in our own collection to which that terms refers, and as a result the word becomes intelligible. Oftentimes, our collection of particular ideas sufficiently overlaps with the other person’s collection, and we can be said to be talking about the same things; here “...the custom is more entire, and ‘tis seldom we run into...errors” (Hume, *Treatise* 21). This seems consistent with the way that we generally think of customs; they are shared by people in a particular time and place because those people experience every day roughly the same phenomena, in addition to talking about it, furthermore making those ideas a source of common ground.

But at other times, though we know the word that the other speaks, the partial consideration of our own particular ideas does not overlap with the other person's such that we are talking or thinking about the same thing in using that word. Here, "the mind proceeds from some imperfection in its faculties; and such a one as is often the source of false reasoning and sophistry. But this is principally the case with those ideas which are abstruse and compounded" (Hume, *Treatise* 21). These abstruse and compounded ideas, however, are used often in everyday situations. Hume gives the example of "a thousand"; it is an idea revived only by the word, because impressions of it are scarce, if possible at all. Thus, we use terms connected to imperfectly formed ideas (others would be "*government, church, negotiation, conquest*" (Hume, *Treatise* 23), business, society, morality), but "This imperfection...is never felt in our reasonings" (Hume, *Treatise* 23).⁹ As we will see in this paper, there are particular problems in our interpretation of what "government" means, allowing political leaders to interpret it differently from how their people do.

In the world of philosophy, its abstruse and compounded ideas can also be imperfectly formed (where the ideas are of such a nature that it is difficult to have a sufficiently complete impression from which they arise). Hume acknowledges this in his discussion of the terms "liberty" and "necessity" in what we now refer to as the free will/determinism debate. In the section "Of Liberty and Necessity," Hume argues that the "the whole controversy [of liberty and necessity] has hitherto turned merely upon words" (Hume, *Enquiries* 81), reinforcing this notion

that ambiguity and confusion are inherent possibilities in the use of words. Hume's choice of the word "annex" as the type of connection between a term and an idea is fitting, as it seems that particular annexations are decided upon based on custom, which is variable; from the Oxford English Dictionary, we see that to annex a word is to "join it in a subordinate manner" or "to add as an additional part to existing possessions". This seems different from a stronger connection classified as an association or a relation. It seems to me that annexation thus implies a loose connection, therefore allowing for one term, such as "liberty" or "necessity", to represent multiple ideas, making the idea to which a term refers indeterminate. Further complicating matters, annexation also allows a single term to represent different ideas which are possibly contradictory to one another. With his discussion of liberty and necessity, Hume wishes to fix the definitions of these terms, for the sake of more fruitful philosophical debate than was taking place at the time.

In the section on liberty and necessity, Hume comments on how convenient it would be if the meanings of terms were fixed, allowing that we would no longer dispute over words, but rather, meanings. In reality, however, meanings are not fixed to terms, and philosophers dispute over which are the proper words to use, rather than debating more substantially over definitions. Hume thus intends his observations of the controversy to fix the definitions of the terms "liberty" and "necessity" so that the controversy may be laid to rest. He examines the issue and creates definitions of the terms based on how humans

actually think and conceive of their own actions and those of others, and he expects everyone to drop their own position and side with his. Despite Hume's valiant and ambitious effort toward fixing the definitions of "liberty" and "necessity" for the sake of more fruitful debate, the sheer existence of further debate on the topic of free will and determinism shows that he was unsuccessful in making the problem go away. Perhaps instead the issue is a substantive one, and not based merely on grammar. But if the issue is indeed one of grammar, it seems that not even a careful and thorough argument like Hume's is enough to escape the issues created by abstract ideas and the annexation of terms to them. Rather, terms are by nature loosely connected to ideas, which allows philosophical debate over terms rather than definitions to continue.

In addition to these issues created by insufficiently overlapping collections of particular ideas between people and the looseness of the connection between a term and its idea, there are also variations in humans' general abilities to reason. This results in further possibility of confusion and ambiguity. Hume explains "the great difference in human understandings" (Hume, *Enquiries* 107) in a footnote, though it includes much more than a single difference.¹⁰ He emphasizes that some people are more observant, attentive, and have better memories; "one mind may be larger than another," allowing for better comprehension of large systems, and some men are more easily confused, in varying degrees. Some allow biases from "prejudice, education, passion, party, &c." to affect their reasoning, and it is usual for men to mistakenly form general maxims, which then misguide them. Finally,

experience and “a confidence in human testimony, books, and conversation” give one an advantage by enlarging one’s thought, giving her a larger bank of ideas to draw from in conversation.

It is by the formation of abstract ideas that we are able to converse and think about our own experience, as well as others’. As we will see, without abstraction, education would not be possible, and so it proves to be important in the formation of custom. But using abstract ideas is an inevitably imperfect business, because of our incomplete collections of ideas requiring partial consideration, the looseness of the connection between terms and their ideas, and the variations in each of our abilities to reason. So, in speaking with others, taking in information from media, and so on, there is always the possibility of confusion. Grasping the reality to which a term refers is not always a problem, but sometimes, as Hume points out, people such as political leaders and sensible knaves can use words to confuse others to their disadvantage. This creates the unavoidable possibility of being confused about the perceptual reality to which someone’s words refer. Next, I will discuss the second way that Hume says custom is formed, education; and we will see even further how custom puts us in a position to be both informed and deceived about nature.

4. Education

In explaining the formation of abstract ideas, Hume casually claims that we abstract from our particular experience, “annex” a term to that abstract idea, and then we use that term within a customary orientation in thinking and talking with others. But it is wrong that humans are always able to *actively* annex terms to ideas and then use them amongst themselves. It seems, rather, that we are educated into a custom where these terms are used; in other words, we *passively* accept and use them.¹¹ Hume discusses education as the other way, besides habit, that custom is formed. It seems to me that it is made possible by habit and then abstraction from habit; but, unlike habit, its effect is made in the most part without copying ideas from impressions. Rather, the ideas are put in the mind by another’s testimony, i.e. by parents, teachers, and anyone else we interact with in everyday life. As we will see, however, it is these ideas which govern our beliefs over one half of the time, as Hume says, and thus many of our beliefs are passively accepted, despite lacking a corresponding particular experience. Furthermore, education prevails over habit on many occasions. This results, as have habit and abstract ideas, in imperfect beliefs, readily susceptible to mistaken application, making reflection upon our beliefs from education important.

It is by means of education, which, for our purposes, encompasses all ideas received by way of others’ words that we come to have complex ideas¹² of which we have had no sensible experience. Without it, much of our knowledge of government, history, morality, and so on, would be impossible. Hume calls

education “the frequent repetition of an idea in the imagination” (Hume, *Treatise* 116). Just as habit was formed by the repetition of impressions in perceiving resembling and contiguous events in constant conjunction, education instills belief by repeating ideas, but it does so without those ideas coming from impressions. Thus, it supplies the ground for belief, not by comparing a sense impression to an idea as in belief from experience, but by an idea alone, received from another person.

Custom does not here operate on the mind as any kind of “act of the mind” (Hume, *Treatise* 116), as does belief from first-hand experience. When we gain a belief from experience, we must actively take notice of the repetition of resembling events in constant conjunction for their connection to become vivid enough for us to expect that succession of events to happen as such in the future. In the case of education, however, we are passive to custom’s effects. It is not as if the ideas instilled by education provide a substitute for the comparison of an impression to an idea, as takes place when we have impressions of a cause and effect relation; instead, we passively believe based merely upon a vivid idea given to us through the words of another. Hume illustrates this by explaining that a person whose arm has been amputated will continue to think the arm is there, because the idea of having an arm is so vivid; the idea prevails over the reality of his situation, at least until he is reminded of his condition by an impression. But more simply, for example, we have the belief that there are eight planets in our solar system (without looking into a telescope ourselves), that Thomas Jefferson wrote the

Declaration of Independence, that our government is a system of checks and balances, and so on, because of education; habit, composed of individual, particular experience, could not have informed us of these.

It seems that the ideas conveyed to educate come about in two related ways. The first is from one's own personal habit. A person has experience in something, she abstracts from her experience, and then she conveys the ideas to another, so as to educate. This might be exemplified by a new surgical procedure developed by an individual doctor; after having perfected the procedure (we should hope), the doctor then explains it through words so that others may use it. Of course, teaching through ostension, by showing how to perform the procedure, will be essential, but without the use of words, abstracted from that doctor's particular experience, that teaching would not be complete or as effective.

The second way builds on the first way, but instead of the teacher teaching based on personal habit, the teacher conveys ideas which were taught to her. It often happens that a surgeon further develops a procedure; she takes what she learned previously—through the words of her teacher and not from her own personal experience—and she builds on it. And when she then goes to teach the developments she personally made, she will be teaching what she learned from her teacher, as well as what she learned from personal experience. As such, the ideas which come about through education are the products of building ideas upon ideas, many of which are not gained through personal experience, but rather through the expression of ideas in words. Each idea can conceivably be retraced to

an original habit, but learning it does not require being acquainted with or even having had the original habit from which it was derived. The usefulness of having ideas from education, which we do not have to obtain from habit, is especially shown when Hume talks about how morality and our ideas of virtue and vice come about.

For Hume, justice is an artificial virtue, meaning that, in his view, our propensity to act justly in society does not come from our nature as humans. Though he rejects the idea of human nature as originating in a state of nature, as Hobbes and Locke did in order to create their political theories, Hume views the rules of justice as having first been created upon a conventional agreement among people to peaceably live in society. Upon the discovery that their abilities to protect themselves and their property—and, furthermore, prosper, in regard to their work—are meek and insufficient, humans make a “convention enter’d into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry” (Hume, *Treatise* 489). The necessity of cooperation is realized, because the individual would be better off in society than alone in nature, and rules are put in place to allow these societal conventions to function effectively.

But because these rules are not natural, humans must be made aware of them if society is to work; this snag is remedied by the natural affection and concern which parents have for their children’s well-being. Men and women come

together as a result of the natural need to reproduce and this forms “a new tie” (Hume, *Treatise* 486) between them. This new tie breaks them from their immediate selfish needs and directs their focus to the raising of a child. They then teach the child the moral rules which society has deemed necessary for the successful carrying out of conventions to protect property and keep promises, as in contractual agreements. This teaching, without a doubt, reflects the habits of the individual parents, but it also reflects the teachings of their parent’s parents, of community leaders, religious leaders, educators, and so on. Thus, much of our ideas of morality are formed not by habits—this would take too long and put the success of society at risk—but by the perpetuation of ideas through education.

Of these ideas instilled by education, which then are the bases of beliefs, Hume says that they compose over one half of the opinions that “prevail among mankind” (Hume, *Treatise* 117). Furthermore, these ideas, more often than not, prevail over those beliefs which are grounded in habit. This is to say that over one half of our ideas, which we use to live our lives, do not have correspondent first-hand impressions. And as we are to refer to impressions to confirm the truth of our ideas—though, by nature, education prevails over what we experience—it seems that over one half of our opinions are vulnerable to error. Thus, the possibility that our beliefs from custom will be wrong, and moreover, harmful, is considerable. This is probably why philosophers attempt to disregard custom as a source of truth, but Hume sees philosophers’ propensity to discount new theories

as a tacit acceptance of education as prevalent, thereby showing that philosophers are no better off here than are laymen.

So, we have seen that education allows us to have ideas of which we have no experience, this being “necessary to human life” (Hume, *Enquiries* 111), because there are some things we would rather not learn the hard way, i.e., through bad experiences, such as in moral or legal matters. But this tendency to believe what we are told also has the effect of leading us to believe others’ false testimony, especially when it is given with “an air of truth” (Hume, *Treatise* 121) and eloquence. Hume explains, “Poets themselves, tho’ liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions.” By referring to historical events and characters, this air of truth influences the imagination to create the fictional images which the poet intends to generate, because otherwise, our minds would not assent to the picture the poet unfolds. An air of truth gives entrance to the imagination, but once it has entered, the fiction takes hold and disseminates through the mind, making the whole truth less important. Poets do this to advance their art, but as it seems to me, if one wanted to be deceptive in their use of words, and make others assent to images of states of affairs that are entirely untrue, it would be useful for one to create an air of truth in words which nonetheless referred to a fantastic state of affairs. This false semblance to the truth would make the speaker’s words believable, for otherwise, an attempt at deception through the report of an unbelievable state of affairs is detected by the mind as unreal, and we refuse to believe that that state of affairs actually exists.

Similarly, miracle reporters tell of events which defy the laws of nature, but because they relate the story eloquently, subduing their audience's better judgment and making them less likely to reflect upon that which is reported, they are able to captivate their audience and make them believe the miracle. Hume says, "The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens the idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience" (Hume, *Treatise* 120). Thus, by telling stories which create astonishment, a miracle reporter is able to create ideas in others which are indiscernible from ideas which come from experience. And this vulnerability to believe miracle reporters' stories comes from our willingness to believe others' testimony, such as from teachers and parents, whom we trust, for the most part. As we know, miracle reports are proven untrue and poems sometimes display worlds unseen in our sensible lives. This manipulation, if wielded properly, gives anyone we decide to trust—not just those reporting miracles—the power to deceive and take advantage of us.

The power which manipulators and deceivers gain by creating airs of truth and speaking eloquently, then, ought to be countered by a willingness to be suspicious of others' testimony. Hume offers a number of reasons why we might doubt testimony. He says, "We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations"

(Hume, *Enquiries* 112-3). If any of these reasons arises—in a formal education setting or in everyday life—then we ought to review the matter of fact which the other person speaks of and see for ourselves if their testimony is acceptable. As Hume says, “the ultimate standard, by which we determine all disputes...is always derived from experience and observation” (Hume, *Enquiries* 112). So, in the end, we ought to rely on our senses if we find any reason to doubt what we have been told. With discussion of the role of general rules in Hume’s theory we will complete his view of custom, and see more why we should reflect upon our judgments from custom and review reality for the sake of better reasoning.

5. General Rules

The final piece to our examination of custom is general rules. General rules spring “from those very principles, on which all judgments concerning cause and effect depend” (Hume, *Treatise* 147). Therefore, they are formed as custom is, through habit, abstraction, and education. Hume does not thoroughly explain what they are, except to say that they are “deriv’d from habit and experience,” but he seems to assume that their role is to direct our action. He explains that a man may have a habit of eating pears or drinking red wine, and this is translated into a rule with the force of a “must” or an “always” when he talks about it—“I always eat pears,” this man says. This is not to say, however, that the general rules by which we operate are always explicit to us when we use them, because we follow rules “by a natural transition, which precedes reflection,” from one idea in the imagination to another. But, if we were to articulate the reason we performed some action, we would see that we were following a rule. Further, should circumstances be only similar and not exactly as we previously experienced, our rules still “operate in an inferior degree,” and are “seldom entirely destroy’d.” This is to say that, if pears are unavailable, the man whose habit it is to eat pears “will satisfy himself with melons,” because of the similarity between pears and melons as fruit. As we will see, these qualities of general rules pervade human nature, such that not only do they govern our actions in choosing fruit and booze; they govern our action and our thinking in every facet of our lives, including science, politics, and morality.

In this section, we will first discuss how the elements of custom—habit, abstract ideas, and education—lead to the formation of general rules and then how they function in everyday life. It will be seen that custom creates general rules by which we perceive reality with security, such as with the rule that assumes a political leader to always be the protector of his people. Upon this rule, people are put at ease and are able to take care of their private matters in peace, with the assurance of political protection. As we will see, though, just as with custom, these rules are capable of presenting mistaken views of reality. In Hume's example of the man in an iron cage overhanging a precipice, we see that there is a distinction between the general rule followed by the vulgar and the one followed by the wise man in the assessment of a given situation.

He explains that a man in an iron cage overhanging a precipice, though he knows the iron to be strong, would still fear the danger presented by the descent below him. The enormosity of the precipice overwhelms his mind, though it is but a small danger, because of the sturdiness of the cage. As such, his first judgment, based on the rule that precipices are always dangerous, takes precedent over the reality of the situation and the wiser judgment that iron is always sturdy. In giving this example, Hume is saying that in all situations, the vulgar follow the rule that they are most acquainted with and then let their imagination be carried away without reflection; the wise man, however, points out that if there is evidence upon which a contrary judgment may be formed, then a consideration of

such evidence should be taken and a new judgment formed. Thus we see, “The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet ‘tis only by following them that we can correct this” (Hume, *Treatise* 150); and “Without considering these judgments as the effects of custom on the imagination, we shall lose ourselves in perpetual contradiction and absurdity” (Hume, *Treatise* 155). Further along, when we look at how custom allows us to be deceived, we will see that general rules’ “effects encrease” (Hume, *Treatise* 150), making possible satire and violations of the law of honour, where opposite judgments can be made regarding the exact same reality.

We are first formally introduced to general rules in the *Treatise* as a source of unphilosophical probability. The unphilosophical probabilities are those which are derived from the same principle—the association of ideas to a present impression—as philosophical ways of thinking of probabilities (such as proportioning one’s beliefs to the proportions at which events occur), but they have not the same sanction “to be reasonable foundations of belief and opinion” (Hume, *Treatise* 143). Hume refers to general rules prior to this formal introduction, and there he treats them as a tool of the philosopher. He explains that, when a flaw in the human understanding is discovered, philosophers create a general rule which will remind them of that flaw. For example, a carefully placed general rule would keep one from assenting to what would be a false conception of reality, such as a “feign’d resemblance and contiguity” (Hume, *Treatise* 110), which

is “feeble and uncertain” (Hume, *Treatise* 109). As such, it is curious that Hume would call these an unphilosophical source of probability, but as he explains, general rules have a more ubiquitous role in human life than only as philosophers’ tools. They are first created through habit, abstract ideas, and education, as guides for everyday life. Then, because these have their flaws in informing the judgment about the truth, philosophers—or anyone who takes it upon herself to be reflective—can replace a flawed general rule with another general rule, conceived by way of reflection and review of the circumstances.¹³

So, general rules are first formed through habit. Upon viewing the constant conjunction of events in nature, the calling of one event “cause” and the other “effect” has the effect of saying that this X will always cause this Y, which is the same as applying a rule. This may apply to flames always causing heat, or political leaders always protecting their people. As we have seen, this idea of connection between the events is not something necessarily admitted by observable reality, but rather, it is an idea created in the imagination. The more constant is the conjunction between particular events experienced by an individual, the more the “always” nature of the rule is corroborated, but even upon the experience of exceptions, our habit remains and we at best follow a rule formed proportionally to how the past has occurred. This is to say that exceptions to how we once experienced something do not debunk our rules. Rather, they remain in place, taking the same form as our more certain judgments, despite at times being

tenuous and uncertain. Though general rules pervade our entire experience as humans, I will examine their role in Hume's moral philosophy; there they most obviously display their conflictual nature.

As I have already mentioned, Hume sees justice as an artificial virtue, created by humans for the sake of living in society. Upon the conventions to stabilize property and make promises binding, general rules are formed as the means of establishing and maintaining those conventions, and we gain our idea of just and unjust action based on whether one follows these rules or not. By nature, humans are self-interested, which is to say that we look out for ourselves first in terms of security and protection. Thus, in the natural state, the tendency to be narrowly self-interested would have the effect of making humans solitary, but in solitude it is found to be difficult to perform all the tasks necessary to flourish. We find that we need help with our work in terms of strength and ability, which are closely connected to overall personal security, and without others to provide this help we are at risk of fundamental failure. By coming together and creating societal conventions, such as that which stabilizes property, "Tis by this additional *force, ability, and security*, that society becomes advantageous" (Hume, *Treatise* 485). General rules then direct humans' actions toward measures which carry out those conventions, leading to increased force, ability, and security for humans in society. But this habit of letting others' property be and expecting that our own will be untouched will not be formed in all people; it is something of which people

must first be informed in some way. As we saw in the above section, men and women come together to reproduce, creating a new tie between them, and this new circumstance inspires the parents of the child to make and enforce rules for the creation and maintenance of society and to teach them to their young citizens. An education such as this is made possible by forming abstract ideas.

As was said in the section discussing the formation of abstract ideas, it is through them that our experience becomes an object of which we can think and converse. We take consideration of our own particular experience—inherently finite, because we ourselves are finite beings—we abstract the idea of that experience, and we attach a term to the idea, allowing that idea to then have a more general signification. This requires partial consideration of all possible circumstances because we by nature cannot consider all of them in forming the abstract idea. This is to say that in the formation of a general rule for the sake of society, values such as personal security and the stability of the community are considered, resulting in rules that function in accord with these values. We create general rules which allow only part of all actions that could possibly be performed, but the consideration becomes partial in another sense here that is not explicitly recognized by Hume. The consideration is also partial in that it favors certain actions for sustaining society's stability, prohibits actions which put its stability at risk, leaves some actions up to the individual, and so on. These general rules are partial to some actions because they promote society's well-being, thus allowing

only part of all possible actions to be performed. So, both senses of the word “partial” are relevant to this discussion of partial consideration. As with abstract ideas, this partial consideration results in but “few inconveniences” (Hume, *Treatise* 20), and by these means we are then able to think and talk about rules, allowing us to draw property boundaries, transfer property, and make promises—all of which, manifested through more minor and detailed rules, are absolutely necessary to human society. This is not to say, however, that partial consideration results in zero inconveniences.

Because general rules are produced as a result of habit and abstract ideas, they also take on the aforementioned weaknesses of those aspects of custom. Habits are very easily overlooked in the performance of actions; they are necessary to action but can be mistaken, and yet we overlook our use of them even when they are mistaken. Abstract ideas are useful for thinking and talking, but they are the result of partial consideration, and this allows that in conversation we have different ideas—garnered from different particular experiences—to which we annex the same term, resulting in the possibility of confusion—there are “few inconveniences,” but still some. We thus apply general rules “beyond those instances, from which [they] arose” (Hume, *Treatise* 499), allowing that the application is always potentially mistaken or less than optimal. These two qualities of general rules—that they are easily overlooked in our use of them and they imply a partial consideration, both necessarily susceptible to mistake—are illustrated in

the example of the man in the iron cage which overhangs a precipice. This example will prove to be useful in the course of this argument.

Hume says, “tho’ custom be the foundation of all our judgments, yet sometimes it has an effect on the imagination in opposition to the judgment, and produces a contrariety in our sentiments concerning the same object” (Hume, *Treatise* 147-8). As he goes on to explain, a rule we have gained over time through experience may actually be an inadequate guide in our present circumstances and confound our grasp of a novel situation, such that it steers the understanding in one direction when proper reflection on the situation would result in an entirely different grasp of what is taking place. Thus, only with reflection do we come to a justified understanding in some cases. Hume decides to “illustrate this with a familiar instance...” (Hume, *Treatise* 148)¹⁴:

...let us consider the case of a man, who being hung out from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forebear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, tho’ he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling, by his experience of the solidity of the iron, which supports him; and tho’ the ideas of fall and descent, and harm and death, be deriv’d solely from custom and experience. (Hume, *Treatise* 148)

We ought to wonder, I think, what the circumstances of the man’s “being hung” are, for they would give us a better idea as to what he is thinking. I think that if he voluntarily got into the cage, we might wonder why he trembles at all, because he would know the cage to be sturdy, though we would likely not blame him. I like to imagine, though, that the man was kidnapped, drugged, put in the cage, and then

he woke up. In this case, it makes more sense that he would fear the precipice, because his circumstances were not only novel to him, but they were surprising. Thus, his initial fear of the precipice would make more sense to us, and his reflection would be more of a necessity so as to forebear trembling. He would then observe the sturdiness of the iron after this initial fear. He would replace his first judgment of the precipice as dangerous with a second judgment that the iron of the cage is sturdy.

Here we see two contrary rules working oppositely to one another in the mind, and they regard the same circumstance. These rules are roughly 1) “falling into a precipice is dangerous and leads to death” and 2) “iron is sturdy and can support the weight of a human”. The man in the cage allows his imagination to be taken away by the first rule, because it “strikes so strongly upon him” (Hume, *Treatise* 148), allowing the ideas of falling to his death to govern his perception. Such is the result of permitting one’s imagination to take hold of a rule without proper reflection, as the vulgar do. Here we see that the man in the cage has both overlooked what effect his habit of fearing precipices is having on his judgment and he has considered the wrong circumstances in using the rule he has, that is, if he wishes to forebear trembling. Had the man in the cage taken proper time to reflect on his situation (and it isn’t all that surprising that he did not), however, he would have followed the second rule above, putting his passions at ease, for his situation was not really so dire. He would have shot down any tendency to fear the

precipice and would have instead trusted the iron's sturdiness, and conceivably would still have a lot to wonder about, but that is not our concern here.

In addition to what has already been said in the formation of general rules—about habit concealing itself and abstract ideas requiring partial consideration of the objects to which they are meant to refer—we also learn of general rules from education. As we have seen, education governs our thought despite not corresponding to a first-hand sense impression, which can be misleading. Education makes us vulnerable to others' false testimony; they use an "air of truth" and eloquence so as to make entrance to the imagination with their words and make us believe fantastic things, some of which may be suggestions for following certain general rules, which in reality are not helpful, or even hurtful. As a result we may follow general rules we learn from education that are misguiding or deceptive, potentially leading to pain.

Finally, the opposition of rules allows for satirical use of language where one conceals one's sentiments by making "secret insinuations" (Hume, *Treatise* 150) of one's disdain of another, rather than openly calling him "a fool and coxcomb", for instance. In addition to this, this opposition allows one to conceal a violation "of the laws of honour" (Hume, *Treatise* 152), such that they are able to be "almost imperceptible". These effects of the opposition of general rules all lead to opportunity for the tyrant and the sensible knave to increase their personal wealth, despite the best interests of others. Satire and violations of the law of honour will

be discussed at greater length in the next section. We will now discuss the tyrant and the sensible knave and show how they use these above flaws in human reasoning for their own benefits.

6. The Tyrant and the Sensible Knave

In this section, it is my task to show how the flaws of custom create not only mild confusion in one's everyday life, but how it also allows for more dramatic circumstances where tyrannical leaders and sensible knaves can find some success. We will discuss the role of the political leader, and how he obtains his power in general, and then go on to show how he might abuse this power to oppress his citizens for the sake of personal gain. It will also be seen with the sensible knave that custom and general rules create circumstances where one is able, if one is sensible enough, to circumvent and take advantage of exceptions in society's rules to increase personal wealth at the expense of others by undermining society's basis. I argue that these cases are analogous to the case of the man in the iron cage. Both the tyrant and the knave take advantage of the mass population's tendency to follow the rules of the vulgar; just as the man in the iron cage was carried away by thoughts of fall and descent, people generally tend to trust that their government is protecting them and that others are not perniciously circumventing the rules of society for their own gain. On the other side of this, the tyrant and knave are, unbeknownst to themselves, also following vulgar rules; they overlook certain possibilities, such as being caught in the act and losing all of society's trust, because they are too narrowly focused on their own self interests.

In order to show how custom creates the rules of the vulgar, I will discuss each of the before mentioned problems with custom: the undetectable nature of

habits¹, partial consideration² and loosely annexed terms³ in the formation of abstract ideas, false testimony produced by airs of truth and eloquence⁴, satire, and violations of the law of honour⁵. Following the discussion of these and their relation to the problems of the tyrant and the knave, we will discuss how the rules of the wise man become involved. Just as the man in the iron cage would have seen upon reflection that the iron was sturdy enough to hold him and that his fears of falling were untenable, people would see if they reflected upon their circumstances, that political leaders are capable of oppressing people as much as they are capable of protecting them. Also, they would see that knavery is a possibility and that close observation of others' actions is worthwhile. On the other side, if the tyrant and the knave were to reflect upon their actions, they would see that what they were really doing is pernicious as well as potentially harmful to their own well-beings, potentially leading them to incarceration or death, as many tyrants and knaves have ended up before. I will begin, then, with showing Hume's explanation of why political leaders are necessary and how custom allows them their authority. This will set us up to see how custom as well allows them to establish a tyrannical authority.

¹ p. 22

² p. 29

³ p. 30

⁴ pp. 39-40

⁵ Satire and violations of the law of honour, results of the conditions created by general rules, have not been discussed in detail, though were mentioned on pp. 51-52. These will be discussed later where their relevance will be seen.

We have already seen that societal conventions are set up to direct our passions from purely self-interested pursuits to thinking of others' interests, and then how general rules are used to set up and sustain those conventions. It is found that, with this redirection, humans more easily fulfill their interests of protecting themselves and getting important work done. Hume explains, however, that it still happens that humans revert to their selfish ways and act in contradiction to the dictates of justice. They seek any "trivial advantage" (Hume, *Treatise* 535) for themselves based on the "weakness" in human nature, which "causes...fatal errors" (Hume, *Treatise* 538), of preferring whatever is near and contiguous—immediate advantages to oneself, which are pernicious to society—to what is far and remote—justice and society's long-term prosperity. So, with government we reverse these interests and "render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote" (Hume, *Treatise* 537). We then hand these concerns over to a third party—"civil magistrates, kings and their ministers, our governors and rulers"—whose primary interest is the implementation and enforcement of the rules of justice. It is assumed that political leaders are indifferent to their own interests when they make and enforce these rules, thus giving citizens assurance that society is being run in favor of them. As we know, however, those in the government do not always put their own private interest aside when considering how to govern, and though it may be an unavoidable truth in some degree, it can reach a point of bringing widespread pain by way of oppressive policy.

Hume argues that the only basis needed for society to function is that people follow the rules which set property and promises up in the first place and then maintain their stability, and government is not altogether essential to this purpose. So, it might be wondered why we are to pledge allegiance to a government whose job it is to essentially restrict our freedoms, despite it being assumed that this is for our own good. Hume does not believe that it is a promise that is the basis for this allegiance, as philosophers had argued in his time. This sort of theory would assume that each citizen had put it in words, “I promise to obey the rules put in place by my government,” thereby binding them to future obligations, but this is obviously not what takes place. Rather, we are just “born to such an obedience” (Hume, *Treatise* 548), though sometimes people go so far as to “imagine such persons [as governors or kings] to be their natural rulers,” which they are not—the government’s natural right to exist comes from its providing protection. Thus, we are certainly bound to obey our government, but because its implementation was based on the need for protection and security from all humans’ naturally narrow self-interest, if it is not so protecting us, then we have the right, argues Hume, to deny any allegiance to it without acting counter to justice or nature. Thus we see that the interest of the people is “the immediate sanction of government” (Hume, *Treatise* 551), grounding our natural obligation to government, and “whenever the civil magistrate carries his oppression so far as to render his authority perfectly intolerable, we are no longer [morally] bound to submit to it.”

But how in the first place is a tyrant able to oppress his people if his actions are in direct contradiction to the ground of his power? It all starts with the “principle of human nature...that men are mightily addicted to *general rules*, and that we often carry our maxims beyond those reasons, which first induc’d us to establish them.” The man in the iron cage carried his rule that precipices are dangerous too far in fearing his circumstances, and in the same way do people carry their obedience to rulers too far when in fact the ruler is oppressive. The “resemblance [between a just ruler and an oppressive one] is more apparent than real.” Thus, just as the man in the iron cage follows the vulgar rule and it leads him to tremble in fear, so do people typically follow the vulgar rule that political leaders are protectors, even when they should not. A similar case can be seen with the sensible knave.

In the “Conclusion” of his *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume discusses how the qualities of being useful and agreeable to others and oneself lead to a virtuous character and a happy life. As such, virtue is a self-interested state of living, contrary to a Christian idea of virtue as self-denying. Hume wishes not, however, to allow vicious action, fueled by avarice, ambition, and general perniciousness, to gain any footing due to its essential self-interestedness. Thus, a sensible knave, who “may think an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy” (Hume, *Enquiries* 282), is

not supported by Hume. But the sensible knave presents a special problem because of his “sensibility.” He will follow the general rule that “*honesty is the best policy*,” but when an exception is discovered whereby he can increase his personal fortune undetected by society, he will do so, thus undermining the trust society has in him. This is a widespread problem, if only we look at certain everyday situations in this light.

One cliché example is that of eating a grape in the grocery store’s produce section. Many people do it and it is widely seen as a non-offense, though the argument can be made that one is stealing if one does not pay for the grapes. The store might then need to raise its prices on grapes to compensate for their losses, and all who shop at that store for grapes will be losers in the end. These seemingly innocent grape stealers do not get punished, but as a result of their “taking exceptions,” they affect society negatively. Another, more dramatic, example: the term “Ponzi scheme” has become commonplace lately due to Bernard Madoff’s and others’ crimes in the financial world. These people, little by little, took others’ money under the pretense that they would invest it, but the money never made it back, in Madoff’s case, to over half of his investors. Because of the dismal oversight by the SEC, Madoff was able to gain over \$64 billion by manipulating the rules for his own gain.¹⁵ Thus, upon my view, it seems that sensible knavery is possible because people tend to follow the rule that men are honest until proven otherwise, much like prejudicial overgeneralizations regarding particular races and

nationalities which stem from general rules.¹⁶ Conversely, the sensible knave follows the rule that people are always oblivious to the exceptions in general rules. Madoff, for example, benefited from both of these presumptions.

Let us now take a look at the effects which custom has on our reasoning which lead us to follow the vulgar rules as above, rather than base our thinking on observed reality and thus reason wisely. Each of these corresponds to the elements of custom: habit, abstract ideas, education, and general rules. This will mainly be a recap of what has already been said, though matters regarding satire and violations of the law of honour have not yet been elaborated.

- Habit—self-concealing and undetectable:

We've seen with habit that “where it is strongest, it not only covers over our natural ignorance, but even conceals itself, and seems not to take place” (Hume, *Enquiries* 28-9). It gives us an understanding of what we observe, allowing us to expect effects from their causes, but we also overlook the fact that our reasoning is based on habit. Thus, upon having experienced a functioning government which protects its people, we habitually acquiesce in allegiance to the government and act as if everything is fine. The more we experience that protection, the less likely are we to question our belief in the government; and furthermore, the less likely are we to even notice that our allegiance is only based on the past, because the habit is so concealed and undetectable—we pass over it without reflection. This tendency to ignore what *could* happen as a result of the government's power thus

makes us inherently susceptible to being taken advantage of by the government. A governor may then pass laws which look as though they are protective, because they come from his mouth, but which are instead devious in some way, unrightfully impinging upon his people's liberties.

Similarly, in regard to the sensible knave, if our general life experience has mostly consisted of interactions with honest people, then we form a habit of trusting others. The further our life continues without being affected by others' dishonesty, the stronger is our trust. But, just as above, this tendency to trust others without thinking allows someone such as the sensible knave to take advantage of us. All he has to do is act when no one is looking, and he can gain for himself without repercussion. Certainly, to follow our example from above, Bernard Madoff took advantage of such trust from others, accepting his friends' and family's money on the assumption that we would invest it, and he instead was only returning money to a select few. Furthermore, he had the SEC duped into overlooking his business. He was able to use this Ponzi scheme to steal billions of dollars, partly because the people investing with him had developed a habit of trusting him and partly because of the investigators' habits, which led them to overlook the fraud.

Moving on to the problems with abstract ideas, we will see how the tyrannical leader and sensible knave take advantage of our insufficiently overlapping banks of ideas from experience, making us think of something different than what they mean when they speak. This partial consideration of all

possible ideas to which a given term can refer, which is based on the ideas derived from personal experience and in reference to our own self-interest, makes people in society interpret the tyrant's and knave's words as if they are benevolent. The tyrant and knave, however, interpret their own words in relation to a partial consideration of their own experience and self-interest, and thus manipulate the people in society, using the people's own tendency to consider themselves against them.

- Abstract Ideas—partial consideration and loosely annexed terms:

All ideas, because they are derived from particular impressions, are themselves particular. An abstract idea is no different, but once annexed to a term, we apply it “as if it were universal” (Hume, *Treatise* 20), allowing it to represent all objects to which its term can refer. Thus, even our abstract ideas are particular; we form them by a “partial consideration” of our own experience and assume—because we have to in order to have a conversation—that our collection is sufficient for providing us with the ability to converse, which requires that some of our particular ideas overlap with others'. It is, however, unlikely that our own particular ideas will overlap completely with others' because of our different experience, and this would seem to give leverage to the oppressive leader and the sensible knave. When we think of “government,” as Hume points out (Hume, *Treatise* 23), we cannot have the exact particular correspondent idea, because it is

a concept so complex. Thus, as it seems to me, “government” can be interpreted by the tyrant in favor of his own personal wealth—a partial consideration of his interest—because to him, “government” can mean something like “a tool from which to gain personally.” But when his people interpret “government” as their protector, giving their own interest consideration, “government” means something like “that institution which sets and enforces laws for my protection and prosperity.”

Thus the tyrant takes advantage of his people’s partial consideration to their own self-interest which leads them to follow his rules. They expect his motivation for the installation of rules to be their protection, but in fact, he is motivated by interests contrary to society. In reality, he wields his power and installs rules so as to promote his own self-interest, based on his own partial consideration of himself.⁶ This, however, is obviously contrary to the basis of his power. He is supposed to be indifferent to his own interests—being partial to society and its success as a whole—and make rules that keep society functional and prosperous. The sensible knave is also partial to his own narrow interest and fails to consider others’ interests in society. He is dishonest, undermining the strength of society, which is the basis of people’s protection and prosperity, including his own; but his narrow consideration of himself leaves out the interests of others. In addition to this problem with partial consideration, there are also the aforementioned (pp. 31-

⁶ See pp. 47-48 for discussion of the two senses of the word “partial” that are relevant here.

32) issues with the loose connection between term and idea, as implied in Hume's choice of the word "annexation" to describe the connection.

- Education—false testimony, air of truth and eloquence:

Regarding education, we see that, unlike habit, others' testimony may reference the cause of an effect directly rather than obliquely, as experience does. In experience a cause is less easily detected and only eventually assumed after a repetition of resembling and contiguous events. With testimony, though, we merely need to be told by another person that an effect is caused by X in order to believe it and then guide our lives accordingly. Our passions are then excited by another's words, especially when they speak of things to which our personal dispositions incline; for example, the coward's imagination is excited when he hears of danger. This has, as we will see, both positive and negative effects. Trusting others' testimony allows us to have knowledge of things we have not experienced, including the rules of society and morals, which for most purposes is necessary for our lives. But this trust in others' testimony also leaves us vulnerable to those who intend to inculcate our minds with false ideas.

In addition, Hume mentions that accounts which do not seem to have any truth or reality in them are detectable as such, and furthermore that known liars' accounts are always disregarded. By giving the scene they describe an "air of truth", poets are able to entertain their audience because the images their words produce retain a similitude to the truth. In a related way, I think a tyrant may

speak with an air of truth such that he produces images which have a false similitude to the truth, making his people believe that he intends to protect them. This is to say that if he speaks of a believable state of affairs wherein his people's interests are satisfied, then the people will judge his talk and his reign as acceptable. It will excite their imaginations as it regards their personal security, making them trust him. He may, however, with this very speech, paint a portrait of a state of affairs which he does not intend to make reality. This is similar to the way that poets' words do not exactly reflect reality, but the tyrant, different from the poet, wishes to maliciously deceive the people. He thus reels them in by conveying ideas which seem true, but which lead their minds away from the truth—a measure which, conceivably, leads to the people's demise. The sensible knave, in similar fashion, can create images of himself as an upstanding member of society—as Madoff did—by leading people's imaginations to see him as trustworthy when in reality he is stealing from them.

Beyond creating an air of truth to convince his people, the tyrant also finds a useful tool in eloquence. Hume says, "Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding" (Hume, *Enquiries* 118). In other words, if a tyrant is able to speak in such a way that captivates his willing hearers—which, all of his people would be, as they place the duty of protecting them in his hands—then they will forego reflecting on his words and allow their imaginations to be carried away to thinking that they are safe and

that their trust and allegiance is in the right hands. As Hume says, “by touching such gross and vulgar passions,” “every *Capuchin*, every itinerant or stationary teacher” could captivate the general population. By speaking eloquently, anyone, including especially tyrants and sensible knaves, is able to capture the imaginations of most people, allowing them to infiltrate people’s minds with ideas of fantastical states of affairs which were never intended to be real. The tyrant and the knave create these ideas in other minds for the sake of their own personal fortunes.

Moving on, with the introduction of the situations created by general rules—with satire and the law of honour—we will more vividly be able to see how custom leads humans to follow the potentially flawed rules of the vulgar.

- General rules—satire and violations of the law of honour:

We have already seen that general rules allow for opposite conclusions regarding the same circumstances, especially as shown with the man in the iron cage. This opposition of judgments, Hume says, allows for satirical language which pokes at its target rather than barrages it with violence or overwhelms it with ardor. He says, “Everyone knows, there is an indirect manner of insinuating praise or blame, which is much less shocking than the open flattery or censure of any person” (Hume, *Treatise* 150). When a dear friend is making poor life decisions—drinking too much, dating the wrong people, failing to keep a job, and so on—it is not the friendliest thing to tell him, “You are stupid, and you need to change your

life.” This could have the effect of, rather, making him act even more poorly. Instead, one should veil his true sentiments and use terms and phrases which are softer than the truth, but still convey the same reality. One could say, “The decisions you make to party and date these women have not led to any success for you. Perhaps, you could change some things?” While the reality is unpleasant in both cases, one can soften the blow by veiling the truth in telling his friend that he is doing wrong. One does not have to hurt him by stating the open truth.

In addition to this kind of example, there is political satire, as with the *Colbert Report*, for instance, in which Stephen Colbert plays a conservative news show host. Colbert is not sincere, though, in reporting the news or being conservative; the intention of the show is to demonstrate that some things reported by conservative hosts on other networks, such as Bill O’Reilly, are absurd and laughable. As such, the language and content of the show is meant to poke fun, but it is done in such a way that, especially in the early days of the show, some people thought Colbert was a true conservative. He and his writers veiled their true intentions, which were to expose these absurdities. Thus, by making fun of O’Reilly and others in such a way, Colbert is not openly insulting them, which would be uncivil. He is, rather, veiling his insults, which thereby softens the blows.

It seems to me that veiling the truth, though it is a more refined, wise way of speaking, corresponds to the vulgar rule. The vulgar rule, though it takes into account some element of the truth—precipices are indeed dangerous, as the man

in the iron cage judged—it does not include the whole truth in its formation; the man in the iron cage, when he trembled, did not take into account the sturdy iron cage. Similarly, the friend above counsels by including some of the truth, but he does not let it all out into the open because that could have emotionally damaging effects. Also, Colbert leaves out what he really means, which is that cable news can be absurd. In stating the open truth, though this is a more vulgar way of speaking because it is less acceptable in society to openly abash others, one's talk corresponds with the wise man's rule, which takes the whole truth—or as much as possible—into account. Correspondingly, the man in the iron cage would not have trembled if he had observed the iron's sturdiness, because that part of the situation, when taken into account, was closer to the whole truth.

To bring this around to the political leader, he uses this characteristic of general rules to convey what is actually going on in such a way that does not shock his people. If he were to openly admit everything that is going on in the government, he would likely tell of some things which would not be received well by his people, inciting them to revolt. If he, however, censors his remarks, he is able to avoid telling the whole truth, avoiding any kind of disruption. The sensible knave does the same; he does not openly admit to what he is doing when he speaks. Rather, he veils the full truth, hiding it from the otherwise untrusting public.

Analogous to this phenomenon of satire is “the point of honour” (Hume, *Treatise* 152). Hume says, “There are many particulars in the point of honour both of men and women, whose violations, when open and avow’d, the world never excuses, but which are more apt to overlook, when the appearances are sav’d, and the transgression is secret and conceal’d.” Hume (in a veiled manner of his own) is talking of men and women who have affairs outside their marriages. If there is ample evidence of the affair, then there is little recourse for recovering the digression; “the sign, from which we infer the blameable action, is single.” But if one is able to keep the evidence veiled and underdetermining of reality, then reality will be left uncovered; “the signs are numerous, and decide little or nothing when alone and unaccompany’d with many minute circumstances, which are almost imperceptible.”

We find this to be the case with the tyrant and knave, as well. In the case that a tyrant’s secret oppression is revealed, and the evidence is out in the open, he will have a difficult time of saving face and remaining the leader. Here the evidence of his criminal ways allows his people full authority to overthrow him. But where the tyrant is able to save face and withhold the determining evidence of his oppressiveness, the people are unable to prove he is a criminal. As such, there is but an indication of his oppression, and without overwhelming evidence, he is able to maintain his seat as leader because his fitness, or unfitness, as the leader is underdetermined. In such a case, he may still punish dissenters as traitors who

attempt to undermine his so-called effective ruling practices, because it is not fully determined that he is guilty of any wrongdoing. The sensible knave's success is as much affected by this above point. If the evidence against him is out in the open and puts his guilt beyond all reasonable doubt, he has no recourse with which to defend himself against charges of his knavery. However, when the evidence underdetermines his criminality, no one will see him as a knave; they will just see a normal person, who is only, perhaps, less trustworthy than others.

As we see in Hume's work, there are a number of products of custom that we see in the common human experience, which lead us to ignore the need to reflect, and rely upon our habits and education. Hume does not address them as such, but rather leaves these potentially negative effects lying disjointed throughout his work; without viewing them as I have, Hume has a largely positive view of custom as enabling humans to survive and flourish. As I see it, however, our reliance on custom allows for the possibility that observable reality is different from what we think, because our habits and education make us believe in realities which are simply not what is actually going on. The tyrant and the sensible knave take advantage of our natural propensity toward ignorance and naiveté for their own personal gain. But, as was said before, there is recourse for the vulgar—they ought to take on the philosopher's tendency to doubt what is commonly thought and look anew at what is really going on. Thus, in the next section, it will be my task to show what exactly the philosopher does, as Hume explains it, and how we

can then counter the moves of the tyrants and sensible knaves of the world, allowing us to live in a world of truth, justice, and happiness. As we will see, however, not even the philosopher is fool-proofed against deception, and this makes our position still one of tragedy, though it is a mild tragedy because of the wise man's tactics.

7. The Wise Man's Inadequate Tactic: Reflection and Revision

We have seen how custom, as the ground of human reasoning, allows us to act by presuming the future to be as was the past and basing our future actions on our experience. The man in the iron cage overhanging a precipice allowed his imagination to run wild based on the general rule that precipices are dangerous, but with the opposition of general rules—a vulgar rule from custom and a preferred rule from the wise man—if this man were wiser, he would not have followed the vulgar rule. Based on his prior experience of first judgments' fallibility, he would have used the wise man's tactic of reflecting upon the circumstances and replaced the vulgar rule with one which urged him to reflect upon his circumstances. He thus would not have trembled from the height over which he hung, but would have rested at least somewhat knowing that the iron's strength was holding him up.

In this section we will discuss the wise man's tactic, which allows him to interrupt his reasoning from custom, reflect, and insert skeptical doubts into that customary line of reasoning, which force him to observe the state of affairs again. This review of the circumstances then allows him to replace the vulgar rule, taken at first as certain, with his own, "form'd on the nature of the understanding" (Hume, *Treatise* 149), whose correctness is proportioned to the evidence provided and thus dictates a better action given the circumstances. This scheme to fend off the negative effects of custom, as it did for the man in the iron cage, then becomes

a way for the people oppressed by the tyrannical leader to review his actions and either reprimand him or overthrow his regime based on what they find. People can then also see the sensible knave's injustices by reviewing his actions and seeing that he is undermining society by taking advantage of the exceptions to its rules. Moreover, the wise man's tactic would also be useful for the tyrant and the knave to review their own actions in order to see that their behavior is capable of leading them to their own demise.

Further along, we will see that the more doubts we insert into our reasoning, the less conviction we retain, until finally we are unable to act because our skepticism is so extreme. Therefore, Hume does not advocate such a stance; he observes, "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel" (Hume, *Treatise* 183), meaning that humans are meant to think, but also to act. Thus, it seems to me that our minds are set up such that, even if we very much wanted to, we could not have ideas which exactly match their objects. We have only perceptions—impressions which are copied into ideas—and we thus cannot have a full grasp of an object with which to compare our ideas. We must trust our perception (and our political leaders and other people) to some degree, and we therefore end up somewhere between the absolute skeptic and the absolute dogmatist when we judge best. As a result, we find that not even the philosopher's skepticism, employed by the wise man, can retrieve humans from their own faulty natural faculties.

.....

In his essay, “The Sceptic,” Hume observes that men “confine too much to their principles, and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations” (159).¹⁷ Here, it seems that Hume is speaking of principles much in the same way as he did rules in previous works. Rules give us some understanding of the world, but by their very nature, they leave out aspects of reality, which, in some circumstances, would be helpful to consider. They are based on particular experience, but have the force of stating how things *always* are or *must* be. The wise man, because he has paid attention to the fallibility of his ideas and the ways of the understanding, does not always trust that his first judgment has taken account of the entire circumstance, so he doubts it, and refrains from applying a vulgar rule. His feeling of certainty about the matter decreases by way of the doubt, but nonetheless, his idea comes closer to the truth, because its focus has widened so as to consider alternate probabilities.

In the case of the man in the iron cage, as we have already seen, all humans would fear the precipice because we are interested in our personal safety, but the wise man would forebear trembling by halting this line of thinking based on his first judgment. He would insert a doubt about that fear into his thought, re-observe the situation, and then see that he was relatively safe. In a similar fashion, all people tend to trust their leader, but people oppressed by a tyrannical leader ought to insert a doubt into their customary thinking about the leader. Instead of seeing him as implicitly good because he is in the position of protector—and

furthermore their supposed natural leader—they need to diminish their certainty that he is a just leader and observe what measures he takes to protect them. That being the ground of his power as leader, if it is found upon review that he is using his power for different reasons than he is supposed to, such as increasing his own personal wealth, then the people have the right to demand his ouster. With the sensible knave, instead of thinking that all people are trustworthy, if the people in society inserted doubts into this customary way of thinking, they would see the knave as he is, instead of how they first judge him to be, that is, if he appears honest and upstanding. If we in society thus replace the vulgar rule that political leaders are protectors and others in society are honest with the wise man's rule formed according to our reflection's considerations, we would thereby come closer to truth in our reasoning, and justice and happiness in our lives.

On the other side of this, both the tyrant and the sensible knave would help themselves by inserting doubts into their own customary line of thinking. The tyrant follows a rule that the people take him for granted as their leader, so if he desires, he can manipulate this trust and make the people obey oppressive laws which are against their own best interest. The sensible knave follows a rule that people are gullible, based on their mutual obedience to society's rules, which makes them trust each other. He then takes exceptions to the general rule that "*honesty is the best policy*" (Hume, *Enquiries* 282) if he can maintain others' trust in him by not getting caught. Their following these vulgar rules, even though they

find success by doing so, can have negative consequences, however, just as it can for anyone else.

First, if the tyrant does not take account of how oppressive he is and his reign becomes intolerable, there is the ultimate consequence of being overthrown, undermining the entire operation itself. Without his political power he cannot continue to increase his personal wealth, but moreover he retains relatively little power at all, especially if his loss of power is due to such crime. The sensible knave is often “betrayed by his own maxims” (Hume, *Enquiries* 283), leading him to think he is sneaky when in fact he is risking being caught, which loses the trust of others. As we see with Hume’s assertion that the doctrine of necessity—all actions are caused by one’s character—governs our thinking of others, the tyrant’s actions would lead us to think he has a bad character. The same goes for the sensible knave; once Madoff’s actions were discovered, for instance, the idea which society had of his character changed completely. It is thus assumed that unjust actions emanate from a corrupted character, and both the tyrant and the knave thereby lose all ability to continue as they did, let alone continue as trustworthy citizens in society in any capacity. Furthermore, as we see in “Of Miracles,” those who are caught trying to advance fantastic claims—especially of miracles, but no doubt of anything else, as well—are immediately discredited. Hume says, “A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villainy, has no manner of authority with us” (Hume,

Enquiries 112), which is say to that the tyrant and the knave lose their chance at ever being trusted again if they are caught in their schemes.

As a final consequence of their customary thinking, not only do the tyrant and knave face consequences which would undermine their chances at increasing their personal wealth through these unjust channels, but they deprive themselves of the deepest kind of happiness, not found through material wealth. Hume argues that the happiest person is one who is useful and agreeable to others and himself, and as we can see, neither the tyrant nor the knave is useful or agreeable to others. They are merely useful and agreeable to themselves, and see only their own interest as important, as their actions exemplify. The most virtuous person, lauded by the society in which he or she lives, would never think to commit such injustices, for “Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances, very requisite to happiness” (Hume, *Enquiries* 283). Living as they do in this respectable fashion, their good, honest deeds contribute to their happiness. The virtuous person thus thinks that the tyrant and knave are “the greatest dupes,” because they are wrongly convinced that the “toys and gewgaws” they gain from their actions are worth it. Enjoying one’s own character is in fact the greatest happiness, and because we presume that neither the tyrant nor the knave is able to fully enjoy himself like the virtuous person, these are characters that we refuse to glorify in society. Therefore, the wise man’s tactic of reflection and observation would not only help the tyrant and

knave to avoid the negative consequences resulting from being caught committing unjust acts, but it would also lead them to see that even being successful as they are keeps them from enjoying the deepest happiness possible.

We have now seen that the wise man's tactic leads all of us closer to truth, justice, and happiness; it is valuable for everyday folks, as well as political leaders and thieves. Thus, if by inserting doubts into our customary lines of thinking we find that we come closer to the truth, it might be thought that inserting more and more doubts would lead us closer and closer to the truth. The opposite, however, is the case. More doubts instead lead us to greater uncertainty, until finally we are unable to reason at all, thus also making us incapable of acting, which is our primary means of survival. This inability to ultimately have a full grasp of the object that we are thinking about is based in the fundamental manner in which we have ideas at all. From sense impressions are copied ideas; these are perceptions. When we doubt an idea and review the situation, we replace our first idea with one copied from this new impression. But we have only replaced one perception with another, and this new perception introduces nothing more than new probabilities to what one first thought, decreasing the certainty of the first idea. Thus, to find the real causes of some things we might doubt *ad infinitum*, which would ultimately obliterate any reasoning and passion at all, making life unhappy. Therefore, we must live with uncertainty at times, even as regards the most important matters in life.

Hume acknowledges that there is inherent uncertainty related to political leaders' right to rule and lead as they do. He says that for many regimes, "Twas by the sword" (Hume, *Treatise* 558) that they ultimately won their reign. Despite such a seemingly unjust origin, we are still to obey this government, however, for it is the means of our protection and security. Were we to doubt the basis of governments' power, we would seldom find one which fit any criteria to rule except that it was the present government and thus ought to be obeyed. Further, it may happen that "an exercise of power...may at one time be beneficial to the public, which at another time wou'd be pernicious and tyrannical" (Hume, *Treatise* 563). Thus there is no particular rule with which to decide which rules are just and which are not. As a result, Hume says, "I am afraid we shall never be able to satisfy an impartial enquirer, who adopts no party in political controversies, and will be satisfied with nothing but sound reason and philosophy." So, if we wish to use our skepticism to really make life better, we ought not to be obsessively skeptical, always trying to reach the truth, because the utter truth is not always pleasing, or attainable.

Just as we had devoted ourselves to avoiding dogmatism by inserting doubts into our thinking, we now see that we cannot remedy dogmatism and its negative effects by absolute skepticism either. At some point in our confusion, we have to pick a rule based in some propensity grounded upon custom or personal disposition (like the coward), and follow it; Hume writes, "Where reason is lively,

and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to” (Hume *Treatise* 270). We have to obey the government and trust other people in society in some way, in addition to assuming the future to occur as did the past in all other aspects of our lives. When we reason best, hence, we are thinking somewhere in between a customary line and a skeptical line, which breaks us from an uncritical acceptance of custom. Not even the most devoted absolute skeptic, Hume argues, is able to fully disbelieve in his active life—the “few extravagant skeptics, who after all maintain’d that opinion in words only” (Hume, *Treatise* 214) were never able to sincerely believe their skepticism enough to maintain it in their active lives. In addition, the commitment to skepticism, if upheld too rigidly, can also lead to “the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness” (Hume, *Treatise* 269), Hume acknowledges, which is the opposite of the goal of skepticism—better reasoning for a better life.

After having long studied and reflected, presumably for the sake of writing Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume imagines himself “some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell’d all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate” (Hume, *Treatise* 264). In other words, the exaggerated skepticism which led him to write all his doubts about philosophy and human nature, also led him to a condition unlike that of people involved in the everyday matters of common life. He even doubts his own ability to reason rightly because in his current condition no idea inspires his

assent, and he is left floundering in doubt. Upon surveying those ideas that do draw assent, it seems they come from experience and habit; they are presented with force and vivacity, and we are thus able to follow them with conviction. As a result, we find that, ultimately, the connections we assume to exist in the world “lie merely in ourselves” (Hume, *Treatise* 266). Such a conclusion thus means that our ideas of reality are not necessarily correspondent with reality itself, because the ties between objects are in our minds and not in reality. But, though such a conclusion might lead us to give up entirely, thinking that we cannot get at the ultimate reasons for events in nature and society, Hume says it is something we ought not to worry over too much. Rather, we ought to let our natural inclinations to amusement and socialization (dining, backgammon, conversation) take us away when we see fit.

We thus should allow skeptical doubt to interest us only when it is capable of suggesting better action in common life affairs. Otherwise, we ought to act as if our ideas of reality are correct. Indeed, Hume says, a “*mitigated* scepticism” is an advantage, if we limit our “enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of the human understanding” (Hume, *Enquiries* 162)—enquiries concerning “common life” and “such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience.” He says that studying common life and dedicating one’s time to art and philosophy, “insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain” (Hume, “The Sceptic” 171). As a

result, “philosophy...expects a victory more from the returns of a serious good-humour’d disposition, than from the force of reason and conviction” (Hume, *Treatise* 270). So, if we acknowledge that the singular truth is unattainable with our weak, faulty faculties, we find that we still have a lot to reason about in common life—the matters of custom. In other words, when we give up our debilitating, absolute skepticism and allow custom and our personal disposition’s tendencies to guide us in the common affairs of life, we find that we have already a propensity to believe certain things and thus act in certain ways. And further, we indeed should assent to our ideas based on that propensity. Hence we are left to depend on custom—our habits and education—and all its faults, but by entertaining skeptical doubts, we reason about common matters more effectively.

8. Hume's Theory of Human Nature: A Mild Tragedy

Based on Hume's theory of human nature, I argue that humans are born with the tragic flaw of having to assent to custom—a tenuous and error-stricken band of ideas from habit and education—in order to reason. For Hume, all reasonings are the effect of custom, but this dependence on custom allows for potentially painful circumstances brought on by the tyrannical leader and the sensible knave. These figures take advantage of people's reliance on custom and propensity to follow vulgar general rules, leading them to act upon their potentially false first judgment. Conversely, the tyrant and the knave, themselves, fall victim to the same propensity in human nature to follow vulgar rules, and with this we see that no one is clear of custom's tragic effects.

This tragedy is made mild by the wise man's tactic of entertaining skepticism regarding one's own judgment based on custom, so as not to be dogmatic. The tactic halts our customary line of thinking by inserting skeptical doubts into it, influencing us to review the situation and see, for instance, the tyrant and knave as they really are, rather than as they appear—as mere benevolent characters. The tactic, however, is not a sure-fire manner of avoiding the pain caused by these figures. We must eventually assent to ideas from custom, making us trust our leaders and others in society, and maintaining the conditions

for the tyrant's and knave's pernicious activity. Hence, where Hume has given us a positive view of custom as the means of our thinking, I also show that custom's negative side is unavoidable. Therefore, Hume's theory, as I have shown, places humans in inescapably tragic circumstances, made most painful by tyrants and knaves, wherein the same principle—custom—by which we think at all also leads us into confusion. Hume, however, sees the human condition as merely “whimsical” (Hume, *Enquiries* 129), which is a sort of failure of his to see that, upon his theory, humans are bound to feel pain brought upon them by the deception of others. This mild tragedy that is Hume's theory of human nature will be the subject of this section.

In Hume's work we find him arguing for a positive role for custom in human reasoning. Traditionally, philosophers discount custom as a source of reliable truths, because it is by nature variable and thus produces conflicting maxims. They opt for a more stable manner of finding truth. Descartes, for instance, argued that when ideas are detected as clear and distinct, they are accepted by reason; if they are unclear and indistinct, then they are imperfect, and that is grounds for doubting and discarding them. Many other philosophers, such as Plato, Bacon, and Lord Shaftesbury, drew similar conclusions regarding custom, arguing that one ought to allow something like reason to guide one away from custom and its conflicts.

Hume, however, sees reason as dependent upon custom, thus giving custom a principal role in human nature. As has been shown, custom, for Hume, is composed of personal habit, by way of first-hand experience, and education, given to us through the words of other people—whether in a formal school setting or informally in everyday life. The formation of abstract ideas allows us to take our personal experience and put it into words, which are then used to converse, making education possible. Then, we form general rules, which take our particular experience and give us assurance that things will happen as they did in the past in a more universal sense. With these aspects which compose and then perpetuate custom, we are able to reason about our lives in terms of politics, morality, science, and so on.

Similar to the above philosophers, though, Hume does not find custom to be all good, and based on what he has written, it seems that custom has a negative side. First, habits are self-concealing, making us think that we are reasoning based on an intellectual capacity which appeals to a universal truth, as Descartes thought was possible, even though we are merely reasoning based on personal experience. Once we have become accustomed to trusting others' testimony—such as that of teachers and parents—we become susceptible to deceptive text and speech. By giving one's speech an "air of truth", which makes it sound believable, but which is telling of unreal circumstances, one is able to deceive others. Also, by speaking eloquently, a speaker can stifle the better judgment of one's audience and keep

them from reflecting upon what could be deceptive speech. In the formation of abstract ideas, we are only able to partially consider all possible ideas to which a term may refer—because we have only our own particular experience to reference. Thus, in conversation, another person may refer to an idea which we have not had, even though the term does refer to something we have experienced, and this allows for the possibility of confusion. Also, the annexation of terms to ideas implies a loose, indeterminate connection between them, making the idea that one has in mind unclear. Finally, the nature of general rules creates the possibility that we will follow a rule which does not pertain exactly to the circumstances of our situation. For example, the man in the iron cage carried his rule that precipices are dangerous too far when he feared the descent, because he was also in a sturdy iron cage which kept him safe; he applied the rule beyond the circumstances from which it was derived. All humans, thus, are capable of a similarly rash judgment when they fail to thoroughly assess the evidence provided by a particular situation.

Thus, Hume shows many ways in which custom produces negative effects for us humans who, nonetheless, must use it to reason. With his examples of the tyrannical leader and the sensible knave, we see tangible reason to fear the negative consequences of our dependence upon custom. The tyrannical leader uses his authority—granted to him by the people for their own protection in society—for his own personal gain. He installs rules which they follow because they trust him as their protector, but these rules are oppressive and against the

people's best interest, leading to pain for them. The sensible knave takes exceptions to the rule that honesty is the best policy, but he does so only when he knows he will not be caught. Because he creates the appearance that he is benevolent, people trust him, but they do so to their own detriment, allowing him to cause them pain. With these figures, we see that custom creates conditions for pernicious characters in society, who are able to cause great pain to others when society's ultimate purpose is to protect its members from pain.

Due to the recognized negativity inherent in custom's effects, we should expect Hume to provide us a method for detecting problems brought on by custom and then solving those problems. He does indeed provide us with such a method, but I show that it is incapable of fully eradicating the problems of custom, and this is so due to the way that we are able to have ideas at all. Hume suggests that the wise man, because he has had the experience of his first judgment being faulty, will halt a line of thinking conditioned by custom, find what he can doubt in it, and he will then review the situation he is judging. Then, he will have more evidence for making a more sound judgment. At best, however, he is only able to replace his first idea with another idea—we unfortunately never have more than perceptions of objects to deal with—and this new idea may too be dubitable. Thus, it would be possible for one to doubt *ad infinitum*, until all reasoning is annihilated and no idea incites a propensity in us to assent to it, thereby obstructing our ability to think or act at all. Therefore, we must eventually fall back into a

customary line of thinking which draws our assent, and we cannot altogether avoid custom.

This conclusion, says Hume, leads us to see “the whimsical condition of mankind” (Hume, *Enquiries* 128). We are incapable of reaching the utter truth, and the most earnest attempt to do so should even be seen as laughable. But with the pain brought on by tyrants and knaves I think it is too lighthearted of Hume to call the human condition merely whimsical. If custom gives authority to a political leader and it also creates conditions for him to abuse that authority and oppress the very people who he is meant to protect, then this is worse than whimsical. Also, if custom creates conditions for someone like the sensible knave to be able to look trustworthy so that he can steal from others undetected, then this too points to a condition that is worse than whimsical.

Based on these observations which Hume has made regarding custom’s inescapable, negative effects, I say that the human condition in Hume’s theory is a mild tragedy.¹⁸ On the one hand, just as Victor Frankenstein’s (from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) intelligence and ambition led him to create a monster which caused him severe pain, and which he could not escape, custom also has the potential to cause us pain. We are, by our very natures, susceptible to the tyrant’s and knave’s ways. Conversely, the tyrant and the knave also fall victim to custom, causing them inescapable pain. Tyrants are often discovered as such and are either punished severely or killed, and sensible knaves are often “betrayed by their own maxims”

(Hume, *Enquiries* 233), leading them to be caught. No human, therefore, is completely clear of the negative effects of custom, and it seems, then, that we are determined to feel pain caused by our confusion.

On the other hand, this is a tragedy made mild by the wise man's tactic of doubting one's first judgment, inspired by custom. This tactic allows us to review situations and see the tyrant and knave as pernicious, when indeed they are. As such, we see that (at least in the United States) there is freedom of the press, meant to keep the government and others in check. Investigative journalists refuse to take the appearance of the government at face value, doubting customary thought about government and reviewing its proceeds. Furthermore, we put various policing efforts into place for the sake of preventing knavery and bringing knaves to justice. These efforts of journalists, police, and any of the best of us, however, as we have come to see here, are incapable of fully eradicating the negative effects brought on by custom. So, we are left to do the best we can, following custom and yet doubting it where we see fit, making this a mild tragedy.

In the end, I must wonder if I too ought to doubt my conclusion here, based on my own lights. I have put forward that, as a rule, Hume's conception of human nature is such that we necessarily experience pain because of our reliance on custom, which produces negative effects. It does seem conceivable that not every general rule must lead to pain. But I think that presumes a well-formulated rule—closely correspondent to reality—and I wonder, then, how such a rule becomes so

well-formulated. We have discussed the wise man's tactic of reflecting upon his rules and reviewing the circumstances to which they are applied. A wise man (or a wise society) fashions his thinking so as to avoid pain for the most part. But, based on what Hume says, the wise man only becomes wise from having had the experience of his judgments being wrong. As such, it is by learning that he would eventually be able to live pain-free, and this presupposes that he once experienced pain. So, unless one is extremely lucky, consistently formulating and following the perfect rules (and this seems highly unlikely), then it is by means of experienced pain that we are able to generate the rules of the wise.

Beyond this, one should not ignore the sections of Hume's work which deal with the tyrannical leader and the sensible knave; these figures, because of the great pain they can bring, as well as the inevitability of their existence, make the human condition darker than Hume's conclusion that it is "whimsical". So I cannot give up on this idea that his theory has the tone of a tragedy; we are determined to feel pain brought upon us by the nature of human understanding. We do have the tool of skepticism, which gives us some means of seeing the tyrant and knave as they are, but it is not enough to make them go away completely. Indeed we do not have to settle with living in a tragic condition and perhaps should fight against it. It does not seem determined by Hume that, like Oedipus, to fight against our own condition would be futile, maybe even leading to more pain. For we have seen that, in the case of the harshest tyrant that history has known—Adolf Hitler—that

the fight for good can be won, but such a disaster of course would not have been something that Hume could possibly have worried over. Nor could he have accounted for a knave such as Bernard Madoff, whose crimes inspired increased regulations in the financial sector. But we cannot guarantee that tyrants and knaves will not find success in the future in as yet unknown ways. The defeat of major tyrants and knaves in the past does not create any assurance that they will be unable to commit crimes and cause pain in the future (and, to be sure, the existence of tyrants and knaves in the past does not guarantee they will exist in the future, either—I now understand Hume’s feeling of being an uncouth monster, for we could go back and forth like this *ad infinitum*). We do have our experience, however, to fall back on, which hopefully can soften the tragedy by increasing our awareness of these possibilities. In the end, we are reliant upon custom to reason, and this reliance creates inescapable, negative effects, therefore making Hume’s theory of human nature a mild tragedy. (And yet, should I doubt this?)

Notes

¹ Furthermore, we could not live with only ideas, “For such is the unsteadiness and activity of thought, that the images of every thing, especially of good and evils, are always wandering in the mind; and were it mov’d by every idle conception of this kind, it would never enjoy a moment’s peace and tranquility” (Hume, *Treatise* 119).

² This metaphor of being “out of touch” is fitting here. It is a phrase that we use often in everyday discourse, but here it has a more literal meaning. Hume places emphasis on the correspondence between our sense impressions and our ideas for confirming what is real and what is true. When our ideas are copied from impressions, they are acceptable; but when there is no correspondent impression, we are to be suspicious of them. Thus, when our ideas of reality do not correspond to the way that we experience it through sensation, then we are literally “out of touch” with sensible, observable reality.

³ “When we entertain...any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.” (Hume, *Enquiries* 22)

⁴ This point relates only to the *Treatise’s* explanation.

⁵ At times, Hume uses the terms “custom” and “habit” interchangeably, but for my purposes, I place habit under custom as one part of its composition.

⁶ Note the passive voice here: “...is created in the imagination...” We experience events through our senses, but the imagination takes this data and does more with it on its own, creating an entire worldview. Some ideas are thus not something over which we have complete control.

⁷ It seems that we not only abstract from particular objects like “rock”, “tree”, “house”, but that we also abstract from states of affairs and perceived probabilities in their degrees. For example, I abstract from my particular experience of going to a certain restaurant and am able to relate to a friend about a time when the food was really good and another time that it was mediocre. It seems that the whole of the idea, including the various degrees of particular sentiments I ascribe to my experience, can be abstracted and put in words, and as such all symbolism is in some way the result of abstraction from one’s experience.

⁸ I think it could also be said that even if that idea had force and vivacity, yet it was from the repetition of the idea, as in education (which is discussed in the next section), that it would still lack a precise notion of its object’s degrees of quality and quantity.

⁹ Note that this is the same as that which happens with habits, which cover over themselves, giving us potentially false confidence.

¹⁰ Interestingly, this also shows some differences between animals’ and humans’ understandings.

¹¹ It is true that, at times, we actively annex words to ideas, as in naming children, streets, new biological species, chemicals, and so on, but others are then expected to passively accept the name as applying to the idea of that thing. But even in these instances of actively annexing terms to ideas of objects, we draw from a base of possible terms, oftentimes. It is common to give children names from tradition, name new species after one’s family name (e.g. the *Alstroemeria* lily being named after Claude Alstroemer), name streets based on themes, and so on.

¹² Hume makes clear early in the *Treatise* that a simple idea, such as that received from the taste of pineapple, is only possible by having that impression first-hand. That is not an idea which could be taught by way of another’s words. Complex ideas are then compounded using simple ideas and can be of things we do not experience in reality, such as a unicorn, which is an idea composed of the simple ideas of a horse and a horned animal.

¹³ Though the philosopher rejects flawed general rules from custom, she must still replace the flawed one with another general rule. This new general rule will be formed as the previous one was—through experience and observation—even though it is presumably better at leading one’s action in accordance with the truth.

¹⁴ On a minor note, I find it amusing that Hume classifies this hypothetical situation as “familiar.” Perhaps in the early 18th century people often found themselves overhanging precipices in iron cages, but in this century I think one would be hard pressed to find someone who has.

¹⁵ All information on Bernard Madoff garnered from Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madoff_investment_scandal

¹⁶ Hume says of general rules that we rashly form them to ourselves and they “are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE. An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity...” (Hume, *Treatise* 146). It seems that it is this same sort of prejudice which is employed in thinking that people in society are trustworthy, when in reality, they all are not.

¹⁷ Hume is specifically speaking of philosophers and their tendencies here, but I think it is safe for us to expand this observation to all humans, considering what we’ve learned from other parts of Hume’s work.

¹⁸ To call Hume’s theory a “mild tragedy” might seem oxymoronic, but I think it is fitting. I mean it to designate that we indeed have some recourse against custom’s negative effects. We, however, remain affected by custom and cannot avoid that it may still affect us negatively.

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