

**With all the Colors of Eloquence: understandig, sympathy, and sentiments
in Hume's *Treatise* – Número 97 – 05/2013 – [47-54]**

The search for universal axioms seems to be a role played by almost all philosophers. Reading them, or listening to a loud discussion, we might question ourselves: What if we could touch the reality at the same time? We probably would not have many of those disagreements that entertain some skeptical thinkers. The inventions made by humans are fascinating; at least for those kinds of spectator that seem to be mesmerized while witnessing the fights and disputes for the truth. Such kind of event seems to be always marked by the pleasant reflections we make after contemplating understanding machines at work. Human minds in action, making an effort at every second to stay coherent, trying to appease solipsistic fights between passions and purposes in order to demonstrate the universal truth that resides inside of each one's mind. Everyone who believes in possessing a universal truth must agree that the perfect place for it is not in his mind.

For those, disclosure is almost necessary. That is the reason why I believe that this place, which occupies those brilliant thinkers that affirm to know universal truths, is not as comfortable as that one in which we can see them fighting. "Disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as every thing was certain. Amidst all this bustle it is not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence". (T Intro. 2; SBN xiii-xiv) How eloquence could carry such prize? We can see the *Treatise* as a big answer for this question. In it, Hume tries to express how he thinks we construct our beliefs and give our assent to expressed ones, always from experience. About the influence of belief, he writes: "It is difficult for us to withhold our assent from what is painted out to us in all the colours of eloquence; and the vivacity produced by the fancy is in many cases greater than that which arises from custom and experience." (T 1.3.10.8; SBN 122-3)

Sitting here, as spectators, we can suppose the anguish of those who try to persuade ourselves by eloquence. However, how can we suppose the existence of such kind of complex feeling just by reading them – even without the presence of body language or voice intonation? What if when, by doing so, in some way trying to put ourselves in this uncomfortable place, and believing to feel the same, we are more susceptible to give our assent to their propositions? Since it is an essay from the work of David Hume, one might rightly say that this event can be explained with the concept of sympathy. The sympathy, in Hume's terms, is not commonly referenced for the matters of understanding. My intention, though, is to develop one possible interpretation of the *Treatise* that puts the concepts of assent and belief as dependent on this other one, of sympathy; after that, I aim to presume one different place for our sentiments.

Part one**Beneath the Surface: The Belief of Recognition and a Sympathy for the Understanding.**

At the end of the introduction of the *Treatise*, we can read a justification of the value of a science of human nature. From this justification, we can presume the existence of at least two different points of view of the same object. As an impression, the first one counts with its vividness. The human body, in all its physical extensions, can be the object of sciences of nature, such as biology, chemistry, physics, etc.. Those are, though, manners to inquire the relation between men and the ambient in which it is inserted. The second one looks like the humane description of an idea, because of its pallidness. This way of seeing the human existence, which cares more about its “behavior in company, in affairs, and [in their] pleasures” (T Intro. 10; SBN xviii-xix), has a major disadvantage. A manner to inquire the relations between man and man must deal with the inexistence of an external common point to discuss.

We can speculate on the composition of a rock for years. It shall remain the same; insofar we try to adjust our ways to think about it. Now that we know that this work is about our attempts of sharing, is not difficult to imagine that the desire to know what others think is as great as the power that would have someone who was in possession of such skill. However, each one of us must be satisfied with the perception of resemblances between human creatures, even though we should never trust them. The most interesting feature of the *Treatise* is, perhaps, the way its author, knowing the impossibility of entering in everyone’s mind, becomes able to develop a complex system about it.

The lack of an external stable object may be considered the reason why he said: “The approbation of the public I consider as the greatest reward of my labours; but am determined to regard its judgment, whatever it be, as my best instruction” (T advertising). According to this, the *Treatise* itself might be the major experiment Hume could have done. He, an exemplar of a group he imagined, tried to organize the processes he could perceive in his mind, while looking to the others he recognized, in order to put it later to the t(a)est of public. The major reward he could receive was waiting for him after the assent of those who could test it in themselves – the human creatures, exemplars of human nature. We can affirm that if the treatise were a set of absurd claims about the components of our nature, we probably would not have seen its influence in so many ways of thinking, and probably would not have appealed to read such a long book.

The way he captures us itself must be an object of this present work. The foundation of the science of the Human Nature is the ground that sustains a beautiful tree, yet full of mysteries and possibilities of thought variations that makes us able to keep thinking of and with his system. One of those

variations has to say that the intention of starting a work based on the Human Nature evidences the belief on its existence. Using his system, we might not have troubles affirming that the Human Nature is an abstract idea that turns itself into a belief every time we, from the actions of the others, have impressions and ideas of things that we think are very similar to those that we have done or are up to do.

However, thinking in some beliefs of recognition from impressions of actions does not seem to be the best way to start it. It could be compared to an attempt to start talking about Hume from his conception of identity. We ought to say that the Hume's brilliant system has its degrees. It starts with simple impressions to find out that all we got are complex ones; and that those are as hard to express as is easy to find examples that better explain them. Moreover, the example seems to carry an important role in relation to issues arising from complex ideas and of sentiments that seem not have a name. We shall start from the surface if we want to go deeper.

In order to search our simplest version of belief in self-identity, I must point out some of the simplest impressions that can be related to the ideas that we have about what composes us. After trying hard, I notice that the simplest I can reach looking for this kind of constitution that is related to the experience we can have with and from our body. That is to say that, before we can figure complex beliefs of ourselves, we have one of our physical constitution. We should notice that beliefs of such kind seem to be as solid as simple. According to this, we should not try to persuade someone that he do not own his legs, if we does not want to seem ridiculous.

To recognize an object that appears to us like something very similar to that thing we already believe as being ourselves is to form an abstract idea of common being. As simple as that, humans exists – at least as an abstract idea. To imagine that we are inside such kind of group can only be possible if, after other beliefs, there is one of self-recognition from the images we have of others. This is, at least in my mind, the first premise from which we can work with the idea of a Human Nature. When someone puts itself as an exemplar of this group, is easy for him to believe that there is no process he can find in his mind that should not be considered an aspect of this kind of nature. Something should prevent those ones from being an example of Freud's concept of omnipotence of thought.

The humean assertion is wise, since it tells us that his work is done from a duet composed by *experience* and *observation*. (T Intro. 7; SBN xvi-xvii) So as to talk about the understanding as a matter of Human Nature I shall experience it in myself before trying to observe its occurrences from the hints exposed when those who I believe are similar to me try to express the movements and the images of their minds. Such kind of observation must include those traps of the mind that makes we believe that we are much more than a collection of feelings.

However, this belief on the existence of others who might respond to their experiences in a similar way that we think we do, does not seem to be a kind of sympathy yet. Hume describes sympathy as “that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to *receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments*, however different from, or even contrary to our own”. (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316-17) The sympathy is a common action of human creatures that reveal the existence of some resemblance between them. As I see it, the reception of an inclination that is contrary to my own is only possible if I believe that that one whose ideas I sympathize with has a similar structure of understanding that I have. Something must make me feel like his assumptions were made through mind processes that are more feasible than mine are.

About Credulity, he writes: “No weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call credulity, or a too easy faith in the testimony of other; and this weakness is also very naturally accounted for from the influence of resemblance.” The strength of the testimonial is, at least at the surface of his system, related to this propensity to assent to it after believing there is a major resemblance between the ways we understand the matters of fact. From now on, the relation between this belief of recognition, the perception of resemblances, and sympathy must be inquired.

About sympathy, Hume wrote:

(...) Nature has preserved a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves. The case is the same with the fabric of the mind, as with that of the body. However the parts may differ in shape or size, their structure and composition are in general the same. There is a very remarkable resemblance, which preserves itself amidst all their variety; and this resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of the others; and embrace them with facility and pleasure. (...) The stronger the relation is between ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person. (T 2.1.11.5; SBN 318)

Regarding to that very first kind of belief of recognition, humans can make assumptions about the experiences of other bodies from their own. A belief of recognition based on those that make us able to affirm, with conviction, that if a blade enters someone’s skin, it will cause pain, can be described as formed by the relation of cause and effect plus the unpleasant feeling of pain. A belief based on a constant conjunction that persists while a body has contact with objects that can hurt it.

The most important thing for this present work is the perception of resemblances of the *fabric of the mind*. Though, such kind of perception

between the understanding of others and mine appears to me in three different ways.

The first is the simplest one. From the other attempts of expression of ideas, I could believe to recognize some. Therefore, I can suppose that both of us have ideas so similar that I find no trouble saying that we have the same one. An attempt of expression of an idea, as I listen to it, affects me as an impression from which I have an idea. By custom, I can associate it to my ideas of memory. After that, I can judge if I already knew that or if it is brand new information.

This first kind does not seem to require any kind of sympathy, since all we need to firstly judge an affirmative as right or wrong is to consult our ideas and beliefs. I shall say that if we want to stay coherent with Hume's work, we might notice that pure new information is as rare as simple impressions; thus, as we will see bellow, this distinction is merely analytic and completely dependent on the other ones.

The second mode of perception of resemblance of the fabric of the mind is one of the components of human understanding. We can find a good example of it when Hume, willing to explain the distinction between impressions and ideas, says: "I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference between feeling and thinking" (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1-2). We can figure that when he asks for a consultation of the reader with himself, he is also proving the existence of a resemblance between the components of the understanding of both – the reader and the writer. That is to say that, after doing this move, the only ones who will stay with him are those who can notice this primary distinction, those who also agree about the existence of resembling components of understanding. Someone might say that it is possible to keep reading without giving assent to propositions, but as we will see after the third kind, the difference between the way we feel in both situations is meaningful.

This third kind of perception is one that denounces the existence of resemblance between the movements of the mind that, which also put the habit as a component of the human nature. The relations of the ideas and the way we associate them by custom cannot seem to be explained without an example of it working. What makes the relations of the ideas mentioned by Hume hard to describe while easy to explain is a perception of resembling movements. However, after we give our assent to the existence of a similar component that acts similarly when associating ideas, we can perceive resemblances in the movements that are conditioned by them. According to this, the relations between ideas, as examples of movements of imagination, must be recognized to make sense; to make us feel like the association have sense.

Those perceptions of resemblance in human understanding, therefore, can be summarized like this: Images, composition of understanding, and its movements. We might find no trouble affirming that they are constantly conjoined in human discussions. We can also better express this conjunction by showing another example from the movements that Hume does. When he tries to explain the nature of the belief, he says: “This operation of the mind, which forms the belief of any matter of fact, seems hitherto to have been one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy; though no one has so much suspected, that there was any difficulty in explaining it. (...) *But when I would explain this manner, I scarce find any word that fully answers the case, but am obliged to have recourse to every one’s feeling, in order to give him a perfect notion of this operation of the mind.*”(T 1.3.7.8; SBN 97-8) A belief, though, can be distinguished from another idea by a specific feeling. Which, in order to avoid later confusions, we may call “Eureka Feeling”.

Part Two

The Dark Half of the Blue: a Place for the Sentiments.

While noticing that at each step we find more difficulties to separate these types of perception, I answer myself in what consists the *recourse* that Hume had. Again, he asked for the consultation of the readers, however, at this time it was not for a distinction of composition but for a feeling that can make us distinct two aspects of understanding. However, if we can utilize the description of our perception of movement that Hume writes in the first book, noticing that it is made by the perception of succession of distinct impressions, we can assume that the understanding itself is full of feelings of its movements. In addition, this seems to light up the claim that we “are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 252-53)

Hume says that the reason why the ideas we believe in make us feel different is its proximity with what he calls firmness(T 1.3.7.8; SBN 97-8). Our capacity to assent to other’s ideas could be related to our capacity of sympathizing with those feelings. Accordingly, the way that philosophers do it seems to be less mysterious than its identity itself; while reading them, we have nothing but hints provided by images and movements to suppose how he feels from the things we believe. Having said that, we can presume the existence of some kind of sympathy for the matters of understanding; and I see no other way we can receive the inclinations of the others by communication.

The sympathy does not seem to be an applicable concept to the images of the understanding, but one by which we can suppose we feel like those who are trying to express their thoughts. Since we will have no trouble with the resembling components of the human understanding, we can easily establish

a path by which images pass through. After the impressions, he have the ideas as their correspondent images; and the images of our ideas of memory can be mixed by the association that is forced by custom in acts of imagination, never without being affected by the passions. However, we might find some other issues if we want to establish a similar path for the sentiments. When we try to remember a sentiment, we must consult our memory ideas; however, we would not find a correspondent image from the feeling that could be related to it as a vividness correspondent. At the same time, the sentiments can fulfill our ideas making unnecessary to put much effort into remembering an unpleasant feeling when it accompanies some idea.

That is to say that if we intent to explain to a child what a sentiment like anguish is, we shall not proceed by the same way we would do when trying to explain what a chair is. While explaining the identity of something that can be found in the surface of the humean system, we can use other images that we believe the listener knows. However, if we want to explain what anguish is, we might prefer to describe a situation that, besides acting in his understanding mobilizing many other images, can make him remember what they felt or presume what they would feel in the described situation.

Every image of the understanding seems to have the power to mobilize many ideas of sentiment. At this moment, it seems like we are more capable to answer the question with which we started. If everyone could touch the reality at the same time, we might still discuss the happenings of it after each perception. The only situation in which we can imagine the extinction of our conflicts of ideas is the one described by the happening of absolutely the same thing to all of us. In this situation, enabled by the components of the mind that allows us to imagine chimeras, the entire group of human beings could be described as one within which would reside universal truths. It seems that in this way we would not need even consider the possibility of the need for its disclosure. However, in order to avoid such kind of chimera, we should stick with our impressions. Nevertheless, the way this kind of assumption can take over many minds is remarkable. We always seem to be willing to accept speeches that captivate us by the emotions that we can feel through sympathy – only possible if there are beliefs of recognition formed by the perception of similarities.

I wonder if I could relate this kind of sentiment to that feeling that makes us notice the difference between an idea and a belief, but this does not seem to be the case. That kind of feeling that comes from the processes of the mind should not be confounded with the sentiments, in spite of it, this appears to be a very common confusion we make. An assent facilitated by a sympathy for the “Eureka Feeling” is very different from a sympathy for the anguish that an author might feel.

Conclusion Remarks

After all, I ask myself why the skeptic behaves differently while others are trying to persuade them with all the colors of eloquence. Firstly, it seems like a matter of satisfaction. It is all about feeling better; and as the influence of predominant passions, it depends on the kind of anguish that mostly affects each one. While the majority's great anguish is related to questions of sentiments, the skeptic's is one of the understanding.

When there is a doubt, the skeptic tends to avoid eloquence, which is all that someone that cannot imagine itself dealing with doubts wants. It seems to me that the skeptical tries to avoid the sentiments involved in every movement of the mind; They are those who believe that the disturbing noises of the dogmatic association of ideas make them more distant from the objects they want to think about.

These questions seems to be a great issue for the matters of obedience and sovereignty. There are those who seems to prefer to feel better instead to face realities. By contrary, facing reality will ever be an exercise in coexistence with doubt. There are, therefore, those who prefer the beautiful moments of sympathy in the movements of the speech they listen; whose cool the spirit while diagnosing pleasurable feelings in the heart of the speaker. Moreover, there are those who abhor the presence of feelings in speech, perhaps realizing that they already have a lot of work trying to contain the passions that enslave their reason.

Due to these confusions – that occur especially with regard to issues of moral –, allied to the strength of sympathy, we can see metaphysical systems emerging that claim purposes that do not reside elsewhere but in the imagination of those who confound the search for meanings with the satisfaction of unpleasant sentiments.

At last, if we could apply this metaphor of the blue, we would say that some like it dark, while some prefer it as brighter as possible.

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