Anatomist and Painter: Hume's Struggles as a Sentimental Stylist

Michael L. Frazer, Harvard University

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Abstract: This essay traces the literary development of David Hume's moral philosophy in terms of an unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) conflict between two styles: the straightforward, unemotional style which Hume calls "anatomy" and the emotionally evocative style which he calls "painting." Hume's literary struggles were symptomatic of the conflicting obligations placed on authors in the print culture of Enlightenment Britain. Eighteenth-century authors were believed to have a responsibility to inform their readers, to provide them with clear, accurate insights on important topics. Authors, however, were also believed to have a responsibility to connect with their readers emotionally so as to allow for the creation of the sort of sentimental community so highly valued at the time. Only if such a union of hearts as well as minds was established successfully could printed texts evoke proper moral sentiments and hence become vehicles for both ethical improvement and social reform. While Hume began with a pure commitment to the anatomical approach, both he and his contemporaries quickly came to see this as an unacceptable literary practice. Hume thus began a series of attempts to combine both painting and anatomy in a single text, none of which proved entirely successful. While many commentators have been dissatisfied with either the lack of authentic emotion in Hume's earliest work or with the lack of philosophical depth in his latter publications (or both), these problems must be understood in light of Hume's continual efforts to meet the multiple, conflicting imperatives of Enlightenment print culture.

When David Hume wrote the Baron de Montesquieu "*J'ai consacré ma vie à la philosophie et aux belles-lettres,*"[1] he was not describing himself as having two separate callings. His was a single vocation—one involving the expression of deep thought through beautiful writing.[2] This vocation did not come naturally or easily to Hume. He struggled continually to reshape his approach to prose, famously renouncing the *Treatise of Human Nature* as a literary failure and radically revising the presentation of his philosophy in the *Essays* and two *Enquiries.* This essay will focus on Hume's struggle between two modes of moral-philosophical composition prevalent in his day: the cold, unemotional style associated with experimental science that Hume metaphorically labels "anatomy" and the warm, rhetorical style which he labels "painting."

Hume's literary development over the course of his repeated presentations of his moral-philosophical ideas has already been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. For many years, the conventional wisdom was that enshrined by L. A. Selby-Bigge in the editor's introduction to his edition of the *Enquiries*. The tale told by Selby-Bigge is one of stylistic progress but intellectual decline. While the *Treatise* is "ill-proportioned, incoherent [and] ill-expressed," the *Enquiries* display "elegance, lucidity and proporition."[3] Yet while the *Treatise* is a philosophical masterpiece despite its literary flaws, in the *Enquiries* Hume has come to write works of a "lower philosophical standard" meant for an elegant but unsophisticated lay

[1] Letter 65, April 10, 1749, in *The Letters of David Hume*. 2 Vols. Edited by J. Y. T. Greig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932, Vol. I, pp. 133-138, p. 138.
[2] I owe this observation to M. A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 16-17.
[3] Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals.* Reprinted from the 1777 Edition with Introduction and Analytical Notes by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Third Edition with Text Revised and Notes by P. H. Nidditch. New York: Oxford University Press, 1893/1902/1975, p. x.

audience.[4] Yet just as Bigge's editions came eventually came to give way to new editions of Hume's writings, so too has his position on Hume's philosophical decline given way to new, positive evaluations of the *Essays* and *Enquiries* as remarkable philosophical works in their own right.[5] As so often happens, the counter-orthodoxy has become the orthodoxy, and there is now an air of mustiness to any philosophical dissatisfaction with Hume's later work, perhaps something unscholarly about refusing to accede to Hume's own judgment that of all his writings the second *Enquiry* was "incomparably the best."[6] Even if I am speaking only for myself, however, I must admit that at least some admirers of Hume's thought still experience considerable disappointment with both the literary style of the *Treatise* and the philosophical depth of the *Essays* and *Enquiries*, finding it unfortunate that Hume was never able to express his best ideas using his best prose. The goal of this essay is not to defend my lukewarm evaluation of these works, but to explain the tensions in the literary culture of his day which led Hume to write as he did, tensions which may in turn then help explain why so many over the centuries have found Hume's stylistic choices to be so deeply problematic.

The key to understanding Hume's literary development is to see that his struggle regarding painting and anatomy was not a solitary or idiosyncratic one. It was instead symptomatic of the conflicting obligations created by the relationship between authors and their readers in the print culture of Enlightenment Britain. Enlightenment authors were believed to have a responsibility to inform their readers, to provide them with accurate information on important topics. Doing so would suggest the adoption of an anatomical style. Yet these authors

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[4] Ibid., p. xiv.

[5] For a monograph devoted to refuting Bigge's view of the first *Enquiry*, see Stephen Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding."* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Other contributions to the voluminous literature devoted to salvaging the reputation of Hume's later philosophical writings will be cited throughout this essay as the occasion arises.

[6] Hume, "My Own Life," in *Essays Moral Political and Literary.* Edited by Eugene F. Miller. Revised Edition. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985, , pp. xxxi-xli, p. xxxvi. Henceforth cited as "EMPL."

were also believed to have a responsibility to engage their readers—not only to hold their interest as a necessary prerequisite for the transfer of knowledge, but also to connect with them emotionally so as to allow for the creation of the sort of sentimental community so highly valued in the eighteenth century. Only if authors succeeded in affectively connecting with the readers could texts hope to change hearts as well as minds, evoking proper moral sentiments and hence become vehicles for both ethical improvement and social reform. As a result, while Hume began with a more or less straightforward commitment to the anatomical approach, he came over time to attempt to combine both painting and anatomy in a single text. Doing so, he became convinced, was necessary in order to emotionally engage a wide readership while maintaining philosophical depth and accuracy. It is not clear, however, whether painting and anatomy can actually be combined in the way that Hume wished to combine them. As a result, the tensions between anatomy and painting continued to plague Hume's philosophical composition. The conflicting demands placed on eighteenth century authors may never have been resolved adequately in his work.

Adam Potkay attributes the rise of a cold style of philosophical prose to the emergence of natural science, which in the minds of most eighteenth-century Britons had reached its apogee with Newton. The Royal Society and other institutional advocates of science in early modern Britain promoted an "experimental ideal" according to which "procedural rigor and a transparent language of argumentation should supplant the deceptions of eloquence in all essays addressed to the understanding."[7] Perhaps the most notable statement of this position is by John Locke:

> If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats. And therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they

[7] Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 4.

> are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided, and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them.[8]

At the same time as this dry style was emerging in the work of philosophers inspired by Newtonian science, however, emotional rhetoric remained highly popular. Peter Jones describes the preachers and teachers of Enlightenment Britain as showing a strong "bias towards practical eloquence rather than mere learning."[9] The warm rhetoric of the pulpit and lectern found itself competing with cold empiricism of the laboratory for the loyalties of the British intelligentsia. Enlightenment philosophers' divided allegiances have led historians to debate whose side they were really on. Jones, Nicholas Phillipson and others emphasize the didactic side of the moral philosophy of the British Enlightenment, while P. B. Wood has criticized this emphasis to focus on its naturalistic, empiricist side. What the former camp sees as the development of an art of secularized preaching, the latter camp sees as the development of a science of human nature explicitly modeled on the natural sciences.[10] The obvious resolution to this debate is that both sides are correct. While some British Enlightenment philosophers were preacherly moralists, others were quasi-scientific investigators of morality. Still others had conflicted loyalties, trying to negotiate a third way between the two camps. Hume's corpus offers an excellent case study of precisely such an attempt at literary triangulation.

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[8] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) 3.10.34. Edited with an Introduction by Peter H. Nidditch. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 508. As with all quotations from early modern English-language sources in this essay, I have taken the liberty of modernizing punctuation and spelling for the sake of clarity, even in cases where the editor of the edition consulted has failed to do so.

[9] Peter Jones, "The Scottish Professoriate and the Polite Academy, 1720-1746" in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 89-118, p. 90. See also Nicholas Phillipson, "Adam Smith as Civic Moralist," in the same volume, pp. 179-202.

[10] P. B. Wood, "Hume, Reid and the Science of the Mind," in Stewart and Wright, eds., op. cit., pp. 119-139.

Given that Hume famously believed that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions,"[11] it might seem that his primary loyalties would naturally lie with the rhetorical style. Yet Hume also introduces his philosophical debut, the *Treatise of Human Nature,* as "an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects" (T Cover). If Hume is indeed merely observing the operations of human passion in the same manner as Newton observed the orbits of the planets—and if his only goal is to describe these motions accurately—then the dry, scientific style would seem to be necessary. The truth about human sentiments, like any other form of empirical fact, can only be determined properly through a combination of observation and inductive reasoning, not through emotional contagion. Hume thus complains in the *Treatise* that too often in philosophy "it is not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favorable colors" (T Intro.2). Leaving warm eloquence to other works, Hume's self-stated goal in the *Treatise* is only to present "the accurate anatomy of human nature" (T 1.4.7.23) in general the "anatomy of the mind" (T 2.1.12.2) in particular.

Yet although Hume at first advocated an unsentimental examination of human sentiments, his commitment to dispassionate prose was soon challenged. Hume's first attempts at literary triangulation began before the *Treatise* was even completed. The most important evidence to this effect comes from a letter of September 1739—after the publication of Books I and II of the *Treatise*, but before the publication of Book III, "Of Morals"—in which Hume responds to Francis Hutcheson's feedback on a draft of this first statement of Hume's ethics. "What affected me most in your remarks," Hume tells his intellectual mentor, "is your observing that there wants a certain warmth in the cause of virtue, which, you think all good men would

[11] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740). Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 2.3.3.4. Heneceforth cited as T.

relish and could not displease amidst abstract enquiries." Hutcheson seems to have used a standard metaphor for impassioned eloquence—one even more popular in the eighteenth century than in the twenty-first—in which passionate prose is associated with heat, and dispassionate prose with coldness.[12] Hume insists that his lack of warmth "has not happened by chance, but is the effect of a reasoning either good or bad." His reasoning is as follows:

> There are different ways of examining the mind as well as the body. One may consider it either as an anatomist or as a painter: either to discover its most secret springs and principles or to describe the grace and beauty of its actions. I imagine it impossible to conjoin these two views. Where you pull off the skin and display all the minute parts, there appears something trivial even in the noblest attitudes and most vigorous actions. Nor can you ever render the object graceful or engaging but by clothing the parts again with skin and flesh and presenting only their bare outside. An anatomist, however, can give very good advice to a painter or statuary, and in like manner I am persuaded that a metaphysician may be very helpful to a moralist, though I cannot easily conceive these two characters united in the same work. Any warm sentiment of morals, I am afraid, would have the air of declamation amidst abstract reasonings, and would be esteemed contrary to good taste. And though I am much more ambitious of being esteemed a friend to virtue than a writer of taste, yet I must always carry the latter in my eye, otherwise I must despair of ever being serviceable to virtue. I hope these reasons will satisfy you, though at the same time, I intend to make a new trial, if it be possible to make the moralist and metaphysician agree a little better.[13]

Neither Hutcheson's initial criticisms nor his response to Hume survive. A letter from the following year, however, finds Hume informing his mentor that he has "been very busy in correcting and finishing that discourse concerning morals which you perused." Hume sent Hutcheson the revised version of the conclusion to Book III as evidence.[14] This revised conclusion may be the "new trial" of which Hume wrote earlier. Sure enough, in the published version of that conclusion, Hume repeats the analogical reasoning he already used in his correspondence. Here, he writes:

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[12] "Heat," Potkay observes, "fairly pervades earlier eighteenth-century discussions of eloquence" (Potkay, op. cit., p. 26).
[13] Letter 13, September 17, 1739, in Grieg, ed., Vol. I, pp. 32-33.
[14] Letter 15, March 4 1740, Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 36-38

> The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter; nor in his accurate dissections and portraitures of the smaller parts of the human body pretend to give his figures any graceful and engaging attitude or expression. There is even something hideous or at least minute in the views of things which he presents; and it is necessary the objects should be set more at a distance, and be more covered up from sight, to make them engaging to the eye and imagination. An anatomist, however, is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter, and it is even impracticable to excel in the latter art, without the assistance of the former. We must have an exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connection, before we can design with any elegance or correctness. And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to practical morality, and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations (T 3.3.6.6).

The same double analogy is presented a third time in the first section of the 1748 *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*—retitled *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1758 —albeit now with the greater eloquence characteristic of Hume's later work:

> An artist must be better qualified… who, besides a delicate taste and a quick apprehension, possesses an accurate knowledge of the internal fabric, the operations of the understanding, the workings of the passions, and the various species of sentiment which discriminate vice and virtue. How painful soever this inward search or enquiry may appear, it becomes, in some measure, requisite to those, who would describe with success the obvious and outward appearances of life and manners. The anatomist presents to the eye the most hideous and disagreeable objects, but his science is useful to the painter in delineating even a Venus or a Helen. While the latter employs all the richest colors of his art, and gives his figures the most graceful and engaging airs, he must still carry his attention to the inward structure of the human body: the position of the muscles, the fabric of the bones, and the use and figure of every part or organ. Accuracy is, in every case, advantageous to beauty, and just reasoning to delicate sentiment. In vain would we exalt the one by depreciating the other (EHU 1.8).[15]

Indeed, the entire first section of the first *Enquiry*, "On the Different Species of Philosophy," can be read as an elaboration of the analogical reasoning introduced almost a decade earlier.[16] "As virtue, of all objects, is allowed to be the most valuable," one species of authors "paint her in the most amiable colors, borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence."

[15] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.* Edited by Tom L. Beuachamp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Henceforth cited as EHU.
[16] For a close reading of this section of the first *Enquiry*, see Buckle, op. cit., pp. 121-128.

Such eloquent writers "make us feel the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments." Hume here indicates for the first time the precise techniques that painters can adopt to evoke moral sentiments in their readers, most notably their use of vivid examples. Painters of virtue, he explains, "select the most striking observations and instances from common life; place opposite characters in a proper contrast; and alluring us into the paths of virtue by the views of glory and happiness, direct our steps in these paths by the soundest precepts and most illustrious examples" (EHU 1.1). As is typical of pre-romantic aesthetics, Hume sees the painter's art as essentially mimetic. Painters strive to recreate segments of reality as accurately as possible, and their success can be judged by a representation's ability to evoke the same sentiments which the objects depicted would evoke were they directly available to our observation.[17] "All polite letters," Hume insists, "are nothing but pictures of human life in various attitudes and situations; and inspire us with different sentiments, of praise or blame, admiration or ridicule, according to the qualities of the object, which they set before us" (EHU 1.2).

Anatomists of morals, on the other hand, "regard human nature as a subject of speculation, and with a narrow scrutiny examine it in order to find those principles which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action or behavior." Anatomists treat their examples as data for use in inductive reasoning rather than as valuable in themselves, "proceeding from particular instances to general principles, they still push on their enquiries to principles more general, and rest not satisfied till they arrive at those original principles, by which, in every science, all human curiosity must be bounded."

[17] The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, himself clearly a painter of morality, provides an helpful description of the goals of such painting along these pre-romantic lines. For a thorough analysis of Shaftesbury's *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody* as a piece of pre-romantic moral painting, see Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists and the Birth of Secular Ethics.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 100-112.

What is more, anatomists, unlike painters, do not attempt to reach a general audience. Since "their speculations seem abstract, and even unintelligible to common readers, they aim at the approbation of the learned and the wise; and think themselves sufficiently compensated for the labor of their whole lives, if they can discover some hidden truths, which may contribute to the instruction of posterity" (EHU 1.2).

If anatomists do happen to find some common readers, these readers may not only be confused and left cold; they may even be repulsed by what they read. Just as the body of even the greatest beauty disgusts us if it is cut open on a dissecting table, moral anatomy makes even the greatest virtue seem—borrowing Hume's own words—"trivial," "disagreeable," and even "hideous." This last choice of terms is particularly revealing. As Michael Gill has pointed out, the OED gives as a second definition of "hideous:" "terrible, distressing or revolting to the moral sense," providing examples of this usage from 1692 and 1863. [18]

Hume's analogical use of anatomy to suggest the off-putting effects of a certain kind of moral philosophy is hardly original.[19] Among the treatises written by the hack persona behind Jonathan Swift's 1704 *A Tale of a Tub*—alongside such imagined masterpieces as *A Panegyrical Essay upon the Number Three* and *A General History of Ears*—there is a fictional publication called *Lectures upon a Dissection of Human Nature*. Swift's narrator explains, "I have… dissected the carcass of human nature and read many useful lectures upon the several parts, both containing and contained, till at last it smelt so strong I could preserve it no longer."[20] Even worse, in the introduction to the *Fable of the Bees*, Bernard Mandeville writes that:

[18] Michael B. Gill, "A Philosopher in his Closet: Reflexivity and Justification in Hume's Moral Theory," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. 26:2 (1996), pp. 231-255, fn. 10, p. 236.
[19] For a thorough review of Hume's predecessors in this regard, see M. A. Stewart, "Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First *Enquiry,"* in Peter Millican, ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 67-96, pp. 71-72.
[20] Jonathan Swift, "A Tale of a Tub" (1704), in *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*. Edited by Angus Ross and David Woolley. Oxford World Classics. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 2, p. 59.

> …as those that study the anatomy of dead carcasses may see that the chief organs and nicest springs more immediately required to continue the motion of our machine are not hard bones, strong muscles and nerves, nor the smooth white skin that so beautifully covers them, but small trifling films and little pipes… so they that examine into the nature of man… may observe that what renders him a sociable animal, consists not in his desire of company, good nature, pity, affability, and other graces of a fair outside, but that his vilest and most hateful qualities are the most necessary accomplishments to fit him for the largest, and, according to the world, the happiest and most flourishing societies.[21]

Hume does not want to disgust the reader of the *Treatise* in this way. To the contrary, he hopes that readers of his accurate anatomy of our moral sentiments will become convinced that "not only virtue must be approved of, but also the sense of virtue—and not only that sense, but also the principles from whence it is derived—so that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good." At the conclusion of the *Treatise*, Hume observes that "were it proper in such a subject to bribe the readers assent, or employ anything but solid argument, we are here abundantly supplied with topics to engage the affections" (T 3.3.6.3). The implication, however, is that while Hume's moral anatomy could conceivably be framed to as to evoke reader's positive emotions, such affective "bribery" is not proper in philosophy. It would be easy for someone who has demonstrated the truth of an anti-Mandevillian anatomy of virtue to lure readers into a love of morality, but this would be rhetorical eloquence, not "solid argument," and hence precluded by the genre rules of the philosophical treatise.

Yet if engaging the affections to support the love of virtue were truly impermissible in a philosophical work, Hume could have easily refrained from doing so at all. The conclusion of the *Treatise* is not the transcript of an extemporaneous lecture, but a repeatedly revised piece of polished prose. When Hume insists that evoking rather than merely describing our moral sentiments is impermissible in such a work, it only serves to strengthen the eloquence of this very evocation. Hume employs a similar device in the second *Enquiry*, when he catches himself

[21] Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. 1714/1729. With a Commentary by F. B. Kaye. 2 Vols. Indianaplois, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988, p. 3

in the midst of a rhapsody on the virtue of benevolence. “But I forget,” he writes, “that it is not my present business to recommend generosity and benevolence, or to paint, in their true colors, all the genuine charms of the social virtues.”[22] M. A. Box’s analysis of this passage applies equally well to its analogue in the *Treatise:*

> Initially this seems a plain denial of any hortatory intentions. But on the other hand it is also plainly an admission that he has just been engaged in recommending a virtue and painting its charms. Hume is being arch. He has not really caught himself in getting carried away; he is just imitating, as eighteenth-century prose stylists tended to do, the casual discontinuities, hesitations, afterthoughts and backpedallings of actual conversation. If his commendatory painting of benevolence were really a deviation from his intentions, he could easily have struck it out. The only reason for failing to revise his discussion of benevolence is that it did indeed reflect his intentions.[23]

The fact remains, of course, that Hume confines the explicit engagement of the reader’s affections to the conclusion of the *Treatise*, and that the rest of the work fails to evoke significant emotional reactions. At the same time, however, it is the moral anatomy which dominated the work until this point that has “abundantly supplied” the material which is deployed in the conclusion to evoke warm engagement. If nothing else, this proves that moral anatomy can indeed be useful to the painter of virtue—the painter whom Hume himself becomes, however briefly, in the conclusion to the *Treatise*.

Hume did seem to think that a painterly approach might harm the reception of the *Treatise.* He suggested to Hutcheson that moments of warm rhetoric scattered across a work of cold, abstract reasoning would be seen as contrary to good taste. Yet why is so much abstract reasoning necessary in the first place? It must be because Hume essentially agreed with Locke that it was the only sure path to truth. The thrust of the first section of the first *Enquiry* is therefore not a value-neutral description of the two species of philosophy described, but an

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[22] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.* Edited by Tom L. Beuachamp. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 2.1.5. Henceforth cited as EPM.

[23] Box, op. cit., p. 16. My application of Box’s point to the conclusion of the *Treatise* serves as a refutation of Gill’s contrary reading in Gill, 2006, op. cit., pp. 310-311.

apology for careful, abstract anatomy addressed to a readership Hume assumes to be favorably disposed only to painting. And if dry argument is indeed the path to truth generally, this truth is of the utmost importance when it comes to moral subjects "as may have a direct reference to action and society" (EHU 1.6).

If Hume's analogical reasoning holds correct, however, then they only way to prove that the beauty of virtue is more than skin deep is to flay it, hence destroying this very beauty. Dissection, even of the most genuinely attractive human body, is an inherently grisly business. As Swift noted, it will, in time, inevitably produce a stench. Hume is thus deeply concerned that "there is no virtue or moral duty, but what may, with facility, be refined away… in sifting and scrutinizing it, by every captious rule of logic, in every light or position, in which it may be placed." To be sure, Hume holds that those who escape the genuine authority of morality in this way are indulging in a "false philosophy,"[24] but there is reason to worry that even accurate moral anatomy may have similar results.

The question is how to conduct an accurate anatomy of morality without dismembering our moral sentiments in the process. By the time of the first *Enquiry,* Hume has abandoned his insistence that painting and anatomy be kept separate. Now, he will instead attempt to "unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy" (EHU 1.17), though it is unclear precisely how this is to be accomplished. The literary technique adopted in the *Treatise*—apologetically appending a painterly conclusion to what is otherwise an essentially anatomical work—did not prove successful. This is not to say that the bulk of the *Treatise* was composed without belletristic goals in mind. Box describes Hume's literary intentions in his first work thusly:

> Hume says here that an anatomist should not attempt to prettify the dissected object, but he does not say that the procedures of anatomy themselves cannot be more or less beautiful. Just as the dexterity and precision with which an anatomist wields his scalpel

[24] Hume, "Of the Original Contract," in EMPL, pp. 465-487, p. 482.

> can be marvelous, the manner in which Hume philosophized could be too. Similarly an anatomist's lectures, and Hume's presentation of his findings, could be entertaining as well as instructive. Accordingly in the *Treatise* Hume did not try to beautify moral sentiments in order to recommend morality to his readers, but he did try to make the anatomizing of sentiment as marvelous for readers as he found it himself.[25]

Hume, however, failed to achieve even this relatively modest literary goal. Rather than feeling wonder at his anatomical report, Hume's earliest readers felt at best indifference and confusion, at worst hostility towards an author they saw as seeking to undermine their moral convictions. Although later generations may have come to disagree, for its first readers Hume's anatomy of morals was indeed hideous and disagreeable.

Later in life, Hume was to conclude that his "want of success in publishing the *Treatise of Human Nature* had proceeded more from the manner than the matter."[26] While many have interpreted this to imply that Hume wished simply to improve the presentation of his anatomy with a dash of painterly style, Kate Abramson has convincingly demonstrated that Hume now sought a thoroughgoing synthesis of anatomy and painting—one which required him to rethink his entire compositional approach.[27] Success in this regard, however, was not to come until after Hume attempted another failed experiment.

The initial volume of Hume's *Essays Moral and Political* was published a mere year after the 1740 publication of the third book of the *Treatise*. Hume's literary model for these essays was Joseph Addison. This decision to ape the Addisonian style was not an unusual one in Enlightenment Scotland. *The Spectator* was reprinted in Edinburgh after first appearing in

[25] Box, op. cit., p. 238.
[26] Hume, "My Own Life," in EMPL, pp. xxxi-xli, p. xxxv.
[27] See Kate Abramson, *Hume's Peculiar Sentiments: The Evolution of Hume's Moral Philosophy*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, University of Chicago, 1997; Abramson, "Sympathy and the Project of Hume's Second Enquiry," *Archiv f. Geshichte d. Philosophie* 83 (2000), pp. 45-80; Abramson, "Happy to Unite, or Not?" *Philosophy Compass* 1:3 (2006), pp. 290-302; and Abramson, "Hume's Distinction between Philosophical Anatomy and Painting," *Philosophy Compass* 2:5 (2007), pp. 680-698.

London, and its conversational essays were widely imitated throughout Great Britain.[28] In the advertisement to the first, 1741 volume of his essays, Hume makes his debt to Addison explicit, explaining that his initial plan was to follow Addison's model in terms of both literary style and mode of initial publication: "Most of these essays were wrote with a view of being published as weekly papers, and were intended to comprehend the designs both of the Spectators and Craftsmen. But having dropped the undertaking… before I ventured on to any more serious compositions, I was induced to commit these trifles to the judgment of the public."[29]

Hume seems to have been most influenced by Addison's ambition to bring "philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses."[30] If only the great philosophers of antiquity had access to the technology of printing, Addison is convinced that they would have made use of it "to diffuse good sense through the bulk of a people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrows of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments with innocent amusements."[31] In his early essay "Of Essay Writing," which seems to have been intended as a mission statement for his aborted periodical, Hume celebrates the "league betwixt the learned and conversable worlds, which is so happily begun," and presents himself as an "ambassador from the dominions of learning to those of conversation."[32] In the name of all those of "sound understandings and delicate affections," the learned ambassador proposes an alliance

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[28] For the influence of Addison on the Scottish Enlightenment, see Phillipson, op. cit.
[29] As Cited in Box, op. cit., p. 113. Despite Hume's mention of the partisan *Craftsman*, it is clear that the non-partisan Hume's literary debts were primarily to *The Spectator*.
[30] Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, #10 (March 12, 1711) in Erin Mackie, ed. *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator.* Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 1998, p.89. Hume may have also been inspired in this regard by the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who complained that philosophy "is no longer active in the world, nor can hardly, with any advantage, be brought upon the public stage. We have immured her (poor lady!) in colleges and cells, and have set her servilely to such works as those in the mines" "The Moralists" 1.1, as included in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1732). 3 Vols. Foreword by Douglas Den Uyl. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001,Vol. II pp. 101-247, p. 105. Hume and Addison, however, were united in rejecting Shaftebury's ornate, aristocratic style with a simpler mode of composition more amenable to public tastes.
[31] Addison, *Spectator* #124 (July 23, 1711), in Mackie, ed., pp. 95-96.
[32] "Of Essay Writing," in EMPL, pp. 533-537, p. 535.

against “our common enemies, against the enemies of reason and beauty, people of dull heads and cold hearts.”[33] Far from a sacrifice on the part of philosophers in service to the multitude—far from a return from the light of reason to the darkness of Plato’s cave—this alliance will actually help the learned better achieve their own goal, that of abstract truth. Hume’s reasoning here is characteristically empiricist:

> Learning has been a great loser by being shut up in colleges and cells, and secluded from the world and good company… Even philosophy went to wrack by this moping recluse method of study, and became as chimerical in her conclusions as she was unintelligible in her style and manner of delivery. And indeed, what could be expected from men who never consulted experience in any of their reasonings, or who never searched for that experience, where alone it is to be found, in common life and conversation?[34]

The main problem with this alliance, however, is that the learned are forced to leave their best weapons at the border of the conversable realm. Addison has never been admired as a great thinker, and the highly informal Addisonian essay is an inappropriate form for the communication of correct reasoning on difficult subjects, especially when compared to the success of the dry, Lockean treatise in this regard. Addison’s work is, as Hume acknowledges, “trifling,” and Hume in hindsight describes his own worst essays as giving “neither pleasure nor instruction,” being merely “bad imitations of the agreeable trifling of Addison.”[35] The most Addisonian and trifling of Hume’s early essays—including “Of Essay Writing” itself—were excluded from later collections of Hume’s writings.[36] Box gives a devastating account of the intentional “superficiality,” the “utter emptiness of new or even rigorous thought,” which characterizes these withdrawn pieces:

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[33] Ibid., p. 536. Hume’s extended ambassadorial metaphor is problematically gendered—depicting women as the sovereigns of the kingdom of affection and conversation, while men are sovereigns of the realm of learning—in ways that relate in very complex ways with today’s feminist critique of the opposition to emotion in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy. On this topic—in addition to Jacobson, ed., op cit.—see Lívia Guimarãs, “The Gallant and the Philosopher,” *Hume Studies* 30:1 (2004), pp. 127-148.

[34] “Of Essay Writing,” in EMPL, pp. 534-535.

[35] Letter 468, To William Strahan, February 7, 1772, in Grieg, ed., op. cit., Vol. II, p. 257.

[36] See Box, op. cit., Chapter III (pp. 111-162) and Norah Smith, “Hume’s Rejected Essays,” *Forum For Modern Language Studies* 8 (1972), pp. 354-371.

> Elsewhere in the *Essays*, where he is not walking so closely in Mr. Spectator's steps, Hume can be found advancing new theories and insights, but not in the apprentice pieces, where instead he propounds the following trivial theses: that learning is a desirable conversational trait, that philosophical enthusiasm is to be eschewed, that members of the middle class should be content with their station, that impudence is to be distinguished from decent self-confidence, that marriages would be happier if spouses did not seek dominance, that it would be good for women to read books of history, and that avarice is a ridiculous vice.[37]

All of these theses may be true (although I have my doubts about the value of middle-class complacency), but these truths are both trivial and were universally accepted in Hume's time. Yet while it is easy to dismiss the early essays as a naked attempt for popular success on the heels of the failure of the *Treatise*, the same is not true of the still-painterly works that followed.[38] A thorough reading of Hume's *Essays* and *Enquiries* (collected together as *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*) would reveal that Hume soon improved markedly in his ability to combine eloquent, emotionally evocative writing with profound and original thought.[39] Hume struggled toward a synthesis of Locke and Addison, developing (in Box's apt phrase) a unique genre of "essays which are not quite essays,"[40] as the change in the title of the first *Enquiry* seems to indicate.[41] As has already been mentioned, Hume insisted at the end of his life

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[37] Box, op. cit., p. 127.

[38] John Immerwahr warns us against the tendency of philosophers today to dismiss all of Hume's work except the *Treatise*, seeing all of the later, more popular work as evidence that Hume had "'sold out, deserting his serious work to write popular trifles for fame and profit." See John Immerwahr, "The Anatomist and the Painter: The Continuity of Hume's *Treatise* and *Essays*," Hume Studies 17:1 (1991), pp. 1-14, p. 12. Such a dismissive attitude is, however, justified to a significant extent if it is limited only to the withdrawn essays, which even Hume himself admitted were mere "trifles," and bad ones at that.

[39] Perhaps the greatest of Hume's *Essays* in this regard is the sequence of four pieces on happiness named after the schools of Hellenistic philosophy: "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Skeptic." For my own take on these essays, see Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy,* op. cit., pp. 61-63. For a fuller discussion, see Heydt, op. cit. Heydt notes that, in these four essays, Hume "provides us with a rhetorical performance that might have satisfied Hutcheson's expectations for a work on morals" (p. 9).

[40] Box, op. cit., p. 174.

[41] M. A. Stewart has observed that there appears to have been a similar change in the title of the second *Enquiry,* albeit one made before its initial publication. See Stewart in Millican, ed., op. cit., p. 81, fn. 30. That said, it is important to realize that the English language genre names for different types of philosophical writing—like the philosophical terminology of the time more generally—was never terribly precise. The words "essay" and "treatise" were used loosely, and sometimes even interchangeably, as is evidenced by the fact that the second of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* is described on its title page as "An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government." See Box, op. cit., p. 94.

that of all his writings *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is "incomparably the best."[42] Commentators now generally agree that it was here that Hume came closest to a successful combination of anatomy and painting.[43]

Contrasting Book III of the *Treatise* with the second *Enquiry,* Hume scholars have noted two major changes. First, the most difficult and controversial arguments of the *Treatise* have either been removed or confined to a series of appendices, keeping the stench of anatomy away from the main body of the work. Second, Hume illustrates virtually every point with concrete examples, drawing most of them from actual history. As Hume already noted in the first *Enquiry*, vivid illustrations are the central technique of moral painting, engaging the reader in a way that general principles never could. Our moral sentiments are not affective responses to abstractions, after all, but to the observable behavior of particular individuals. As Hume put it in his (withdrawn, Addisonian) essay "On the Study of History," "When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue." A historian, by contrast, "places the objects in their true point of view," and hence develops "a lively sentiment of blame and praise."[44]

As this passage indicates, it is not poets and preachers, but historians, who are for Hume the best painters of virtue. Hume writes that while poets "can paint virtue in the most charming colors," their undisciplined imaginations often lead them to "become advocates for vice." By contrast, "historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colors, however they may have erred in their judgments of

[42] "My Own Life," in EMPL, p. xxxvi.
[43] See, e.g., Baier, op cit., p. 543 and Baier, "*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: Incomparably the Best?" In Radcliffe, ed., op. cit., pp. 293-320; Abramson, 2000, op. cit., p. 64; and Box, op. cit., p. 238.
[44] "On the Study of History," in EMPL, pp. 563-568, p. 568.

particular persons."[45] It is in the second *Enquiry* that Hume combined the anatomy of his *Treatise* with the accurate and emotionally evocative narrative paintings of his (at the time much more successful) *History of England.*[46]

Such, at least, was Hume's goal. Whether he was fully successful in attaining it is another matter. Certainly, Hume was well aware that he might successfully identify the proper norms communicative practice without possessing the talents necessary to master it himself. For example, although Hume felt that the art of oratory was an indispensable means of instilling proper moral sentiments in a political community, he was so abashed about his Scottish accent that he tried to avoid speaking in public. [47] While Hume undoubtedly had a far higher estimation of his literary than his oratorical abilities, Stephen Buckle interprets the apologetic tone of the first section of the first *Enquiry* as an indication of "Hume's awareness that his success in combining the two kinds of philosophy was likely to be judged (or prejudged) as less than total, at least by his suspected audience."[48]

There is admittedly something awkward about the second *Enquiry's* excess of appendices, and something off-putting about its continuous digressions from philosophy into the deeds of ancient Greeks and Romans. It is not implausible to claim, with Box, that Hume never quite attained what he was trying to achieve in the second *Enquiry*, and that his friend Adam

[45] Hume, "Of the Study of History," in EMPL, pp. 563-568, p. 567.

[46] For an alternative account of Hume's turn to history see James Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development: A Study of his Methods*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Noxon argues that Hume has now come to realize that moral, political and social theory "can be based directly upon the historical study of political events without involving any intricate psychological investigation" (p. 25). There is no contradiction between Noxon's explanation and my own; history may both be more emotionally engaging than moral anatomy and capable of standing on its own as a source of moral and political insight, hence rendering Hume's turn to history overdetermined. For a recent attempt to read Hume's *History* as a kind of political theory, see Andre Sabl, *Hume's Politic: Coordination and Crisis in the "History of England."* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

[47] See Marc Hanvelt, *The Politics of Eloquence: David Hume's Polite Rhetoric*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. Hanvelt insists that the fascinating analysis of Hume's position on oratory thus cannot be applied to Hume's own communicative practices, which were largely limited to the written word (see, e.g., p. 34). Yet much (though not all) of Hanvelt's analysis can in fact be applied to Hume's writing if we make allowances for the different applications of the underlying principles of rhetoric to various media of communication.

[48] Buckle, op. cit., p. 23.

Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* might serve as a better example of success in the genre.[49] Clearly expressing a profound and original moral theory without artificial recourse to appendices, Smith continuously integrates concrete examples into his theory in the form of eloquent narratives—narratives drawn, less often from history and the classics, and more often from homely experiences that his readers could recognize from their own lives.[50] For most of the twentieth century, when Hume's work loomed over all Anglo-American ethics and Smith's moral philosophy was essentially ignored, it might have seemed absurd to suggest that Smith's *Theory* was literarily superior to Hume's second *Enquiry.* Today, however, as Smith's ethics becomes ever-more appreciated, Box's judgment is gaining increasing plausibility.

Smith's *Theory* was certainly praised by Smith's contemporaries for its literary achievements in terms that Hume must have envied. Edmund Burke praises Smith in his correspondence for his "elegant painting of the manners and passions,"[51] and goes on to praise the *Theory* in print as "one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared." Such a work, Burke continues, must not be subject to the deformations of anatomical dissection. "A dry abstract of the system would convey no juster idea of it," he says, "than the skeleton of a departed beauty would of her form when she was alive; at the same time the work is so well methodized, the parts grow so naturally and gracefully out of each other, that it would be doing it equal injustice to show it by broken and detached pieces."[52] To be sure, we might

[49] See Box, op. cit., p. 255.
[50] On Smith's use of these homely yet literary "illustrations," see Phillipson, op. cit., p. 182.
[51] Letter 38, From Edmund Burke, 10 September 1759, *Correspondence of Adam Smith.* Edited by Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987, pp. 46-47, p. 47.
[52] Edmund Burke, "*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith, Professor of Moral Philosophy, in the University of Glasgow," *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature of the Year 1759*. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760, pp. 484-489, pp. 484-485. Burke himself was of course a master of evoking emotion in his readers. Thomas Paine complains that in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* "the tragic paintings by which Mr. Burke has outraged his own imagination and seeks to work upon that of his readers... are very well calculated for theatrical representation… and accommodated to produce… a weeping effect." See Thomas

dismiss this praise of Smith as the sort of hyperbolic flattery often exchanged by eighteenth century men of letters seeking to win one another's good graces. Even if Burke's praise of Smith is exaggerated, however, the anti-anatomical language used to formulate this praise is suggestive of the eighteenth-century literary ideals which Hume struggled so long to meet, and which he may never have succeeded in meeting to either his or others' satisfaction.

Yet Hume's failures as a philosophical-literary stylist do nothing to diminish his achievements, not merely as a philosopher in general, but as a philosophical theorist of literary style itself. An eighteenth-century author who was somehow able to fuse the compositional modes of the anatomist and the painter without significant strain might never have been so acutely aware of the conflicting demands of the literary norms of the era. Hume's authorial struggles are therefore an invaluable resource, not only for historians of the print culture of Eighteenth century Britain, but also for philosophers and writers who still wrestle with analogous problems today.

Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791). Reprinted in *Collected Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1995, pp. 431-662, p. 446.