

## Brief comments on Capaldi's "We Do" interpretation of humean ethics

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Several years ago, summarizing the ideas presented in previous articles, Prof. Capaldi claimed that Hume's "We Do" way of explaining moral life resembled a Copernican Revolution<sup>1</sup>.

Contrary to the rationalist view, this critical Revolution proposes that sympathy complements the passions, other times opposes them. This, together with the acquisition of refined manners which results from living together, serves the needs of society better than mere reason. Sympathy is the "door" towards others, the way we communicate and perceive their sentimental life. Communal living teaches us how changing society maintains some steady characteristics and shows the best ways of ordering and developing the community. Everyone, as a member of his or her society, develops a kind of "We do", anti-rationalistic and anti-individualistic sense of morality.

Within this perspective —Capaldi claims— we discover a more effective theory to explain the norms of social life than the one presented by rationalist philosophers who cannot, for example, perceive the role of tradition as a moral value.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas CAPALDI, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy (Hume's Place)*, Peter Lang, New York 1992, pp. 20 ff. He refers frequently to some of his antecedent works, especially *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher*, Boston: Twayne, 1975; "Hume as Social Scientist" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 32 (1978); "The Copernican Revolution in Hume and Kant", in *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress*, ed. Lewis White Beck, Dordrecht: Reidel 1972; "Copernican Metaphysics", in *New Essays in Metaphysics*, ed. Robert C. Neville, Albany: SUNY Press, 1978. Capaldi's main claim is that the humean "We Do" (social, intersubjective and evolutive) proposal for understanding the fundamentals of moral life is stronger than the "I Think" rationalist systems. This new system implies a Copernican Revolution in moral philosophy.

In addition to the intrinsic problems of explaining the sources of sympathy in the *Treatise*<sup>2</sup>, there are ambiguities which need clarification in the evolution of this term from that work to the *Enquiries* and the *Dissertation on the Passions*. An attentive reading of the latter provides important details for a better comprehension of the whole *Treatise* and a deeper understanding of Hume's philosophical evolution<sup>3</sup>.

In Hume's later works, states Capaldi, sympathy seems less dependent on the exchange of *force and vivacity* among ideas and becomes a *social sentiment*<sup>4</sup>. It is restated as a *sense of humanity* or, simply, *humanity*. Hume also spares himself the effort of explaining the relation of *sympathy* with *benevolence*, a term which he uses more often in his later works.

For Capaldi, Hume's intellectual path deserves special attention as it is there that one can find the motives for his interest in social improvements instead of the concern for harmonizing the elementary notions of an abstract philosophical system<sup>5</sup>.

Practical life is the safety exit for the skeptical philosopher<sup>6</sup>. Research on the foundations of social phenomena is less important than the explanation of the

<sup>2</sup> See for example the connections of *sympathy* and complex sentiments as "love of fame" (2.1.11.), "Our esteem for the rich and powerful" (2.2.5.), "Of the mixture of benevolence and anger with compassion and Malice" (2.2.9., esp. pp. 381-389). Capaldi explains some other problems in the paragraph "Difficulties in the Sympathy Mechanism", in Ch. 6 of *Hume's Place*, pp. 225-236. All quotations and references to *A Treatise of Human Nature* are from the Selby-Bigge edition (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973). Books, Parts and Sections are always in arabic numerals and in decimal fractions (*Treatise* 2.3.5.= Book II, Part 3, Section 5). Quotations to other works are from the Green and Grose edition of *David Hume. The Philosophical Works*, Scientia Verlag Aalen, Darmstadt 1964 (repr. of the new edition, London 1882), vol. 4.

<sup>3</sup> CAPALDI presents —*Hume's Place*, pp. 270-271, and 324-5 (note 52 to p. 27)— the evidences of a shift in Hume's system from the Newtonian mechanical conception of morals in the *Treatise* (1739-40) to a "cultural account" in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (*EPM*, 1751).

<sup>4</sup> One of the most important concerns of Hume in the *Treatise* is to reduce many of the mental phenomena to the "energy" of the impressions, their source. For sympathy we note in 2.2.9, pp. 386-7: "**Sympathy being nothing but a lively idea converted into an impression**, 'tis evident, that, in considering the future possible or probable condition of any person, we may enter into it with so vivid a conception as to make it our own concern" (bold mine). Besides the less conditioned style of the *Enquiries* one find *sympathy* almost as taken for granted in several instances of practical life or historical personages. See *EPM*, pp. 208-209; 210, compared with *Treatise*, pp. 592-593. We find sympathy mentioned just three times in *A Dissertation on the Passions* (pp. 152, 156 and 157). In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (*EHU*) it is used only twice in notes to clarify secondary aspects of discourses (pp. 20-22). See also Capaldi's remarks in *Hume's Place*, pp. 241-247 and 264-265.

<sup>5</sup> *Hume's Place*, pp. 309-313 and notes 49-50 in pp. 370-371.

<sup>6</sup> See *Treatise* 1.4.7., pp. 183-187 and 269-274. Also *EPM*, pp. 245-253, and *EHU*, p. 130: "The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of skepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of human life".

immediate causes and finalities of human behaviour. An active life offers not just relief for human reason but also proposes wide-range solutions to theoretical problems: if every honest citizen knows what is right for his community, why philosophers have to spend more time producing new concepts to explain the most intimate sources of our conduct? History has taught us the futility of this line of research<sup>7</sup>.

Let us trust in *custom* and *good sense* to make judgments concerning human actions<sup>8</sup>. Let sympathy flow and be justly balanced by *general rules*, and we will see that the socially committed and responsible individual acts in the best way<sup>9</sup>. This is a selection of the conclusions we can infer from Capaldi's reading of Hume.

I consider that Capaldi's position valuable. Not least because he is a true proponent of certain aspects of Hume's philosophy. He uses the original texts and within the social context of the Scottish Enlightenment, clarifying erroneous positions based on differing humean or anti-humean interpretations. He further insists on the unity of the three Books of the *Treatise*, as a response to some interpretative proposals which lack harmony with its form or structure<sup>10</sup>. Perhaps the most valuable claim of Capaldi's approach is to blend different positions — the so called humean utilitarianism, his skepticism or his hedonism— by setting them in a wider framework<sup>11</sup>.

His position is not merely useful to correct the traditional interpretations of Hume's way of conceiving the practical reason, but also to connect it with classical doctrines such as the Aristotelian position<sup>12</sup>. In Aristotle's *Ethics* there are several attempts to explain moral life in terms of practical performance. One can find the inclusion of an "extra-rational" way of judging morals with the seeming paradoxical claim that whoever is already acting in the right way can justly evaluate an action<sup>13</sup>.

Hume as well as Aristotle emphasizes the role of education and custom in this

<sup>7</sup> See *EPM*, pp. 187 ff. Against the utopia of the "golden age", see pp. 184-186.

<sup>8</sup> *EPM*, pp. 179-194: custom and common sense as part of the background for justice. See CAPALDI, *Hume's Place*, p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> *Hume's Place*, pp. 262-265. He quotes there *EPM*, pp. 182-183; 257 and 278 as remarkable texts supporting his proposal.

<sup>10</sup> See his discussion of Norton's view, which only considers the *Treatise*, in *Hume's Place*, pp. 151-152. For his view on the role of the passions for understanding Hume's system, see pp. 155-162, "Present State of the Literature on the Passions". He insists both in the unifying value of the second Book within the framework of the *Treatise* and in the development of Hume's later works.

<sup>11</sup> CAPALDI summarizes the main subjects in chapter one of *Hume's Place*, pp. 2-19, "The Historical Treatment of Hume's Theory of Moral Judgment", pp. 131-152. Also pp. 92-94 and 294-297. For "Naturalism", see p. 297; utilitarianism, pp. 303-304; for "egoism" and "hedonism", pp. 304-305.

<sup>12</sup> See *Hume's Place*, pp. 275 and 307.

<sup>13</sup> See for example *Nic. Eth.* 1105<sup>a</sup>17-1105<sup>b</sup>18 and 1113<sup>a</sup>29-<sup>b</sup>2. The treatment of *practical wisdom* deserves special attention in 1106<sup>b</sup>36-1107<sup>a</sup>2; 1140<sup>a</sup>24-b30; 1142<sup>a</sup>12-30.

kind of judgments and it occurs to me that Capaldi's position could be enriched by this comparison<sup>14</sup>.

It is clear that Hume was acquainted with some of Aristotle's works, including the *Nicomachean Ethics*, yet it is equally evident that they did not serve as one of his main sources<sup>15</sup>. Capaldi also notes the differences between Hume's and Aristotle's philosophies, and is correct to indicate the significance of finality in Aristotle's ethical system as an obstacle to the humean empiricist mentality<sup>16</sup>. In a sense the "We Do" perspective generates the moral norms and is not linked with an everlasting framework as Kant's or Aristotle's system<sup>17</sup>.

Nevertheless we can seek a reason for Hume's faith in "general rules" and the validity of one's "sense of reality". The latter is associated with the whole problem of *belief*, one of the fundamental concepts in Hume's *Treatise*, almost taken for granted in the *Enquiries*<sup>18</sup>. Traces of the notion of *general rules* occur in several texts of the *Treatise* and is explained in some important passages of the *Enquiries* and the *Dissertation*.

*General rules* are the statistical outcome of our daily experience and are for Hume an important aspect of the wider notion of *custom*. They carry out a very important role in the retrenchment of movements arising from the passions and in moral evaluations<sup>19</sup>, and act in a similar way to the Aristotelian virtues.

What supports these rules or, at least, our confidence in them? I believe that a partial answer can be traced back to the idea of *preestablished harmony* and an avowed confidence in our perception of the course of nature. It is true that the term *preestablished harmony* is used just once in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*<sup>20</sup>, and never in the *Treatise* or the *Dissertation on the Passions*, however some excerpts of these works can be read in this sense, for example his discussion against radical skepticism, claiming the uniformity of natural

<sup>14</sup>For *education* in Hume's works, see *Treatise*, pp. 116, 295, 472 and 500. *EPM*, pp. 118, 185 and 196. In Aristotle, see *Eth. Nic.* 1104<sup>b</sup>11-13; 1119<sup>b</sup>10-13 and 1130<sup>b</sup>26-27.

<sup>15</sup>See Hume's *EPM*, p. 285. There is a generic reference to Aristotle's *Ethics* within a long discourse where Hume evaluates attentively the contributions of Cicero's position and those of other moral philosophers.

<sup>16</sup>*Hume's Place*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>17</sup>See *Hume's Place*, p. 261 and the last parts of chapter 8, pp. 302-314.

<sup>18</sup>The entire Part 3 of the First Book of the *Treatise* — "Of Knowledge and Probability" — deals in essence with the nature of *belief*. Many of the discussions undertaken in this Part are not represented in *EPM*. See Capaldi *Hume's Place*, Chapter 7, esp. pp. 237-240 and 264-266.

<sup>19</sup>Especially remarkable is their role in "correcting" the appearances of the senses to make the difference between serious conviction and poetical enthusiasm — *Treatise*, pp. 147, 374 and 631-632 —, also correcting the variations in our sympathies to steady our moral sentiments — pp. 581 and 602 —; influencing imagination and sympathy — p. 371 —, conditioning moral obligation — p. 551 —, and passions — pp. 293 and 309. Capaldi underlines the role of *general rules* in pp. 27, 122, 193, 218-220, 230, 242 and 244-246.

<sup>20</sup>*EHU*, 5.2., p. 46: "Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas".

events<sup>21</sup>, and his explanations of the basis of *custom* and inference<sup>22</sup>, or the coincidences between corporal beauty and utility<sup>23</sup>. It appears that in Hume's intellectual development the appeal to the regularity of nature —even to the *wisdom of nature*<sup>24</sup>— provides a firm ground for the foundations of moral enquiry and allows the philosopher to abandon the sterile abstract discussions of some philosophical systems<sup>25</sup>.

It is interesting to view the inclusion of such a “rationalistic” approach to nature in Hume's system as symptomatic of the intrinsic incapacity to create a self-supporting ethical proposal within a merely empiricist philosophy.

I think that Hume's endeavours in explaining a new way of understanding morals offer an original perspective by including some important elements of human life. I agree with Capaldi's claim that the humean proposal admits the integration of active social elements —especially tradition and social evolution— that can hardly be comprehended within strictly rationalist ethical frameworks.

On the other hand, I consider that it is legitimate to emphasize that there are some undemonstrated principles in Hume's empiricist system and to note the need for at least some extra or meta-empirical concepts to complete the ethical behaviour explanation. It seems that Capaldi's agreement with Hume is so complete that he is unable to perceive the necessity for such an account. If it could be affirmed that Aristotle had to risk the rationality of his system by introducing some empirical principles, it is also valid to affirm that Hume had to anchor his skeptical and empiricist proposal to some meta-empirical foundations.

<sup>21</sup> *EHU*, p. 36 and 67 (our idea of necessity and causality derived from the uniformity in the operations of nature) and *Treatise*, pp. 105, 134, 363, 379. Human nature is also determined by the regularity of Nature, as explained in *EPM*, pp. 172 and 271, and *Treatise*, p. 359.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, *EHU*, pp. 39, 43 (nature has established connections among particular ideas), *Treatise*, p. 379.

<sup>23</sup> See *Treatise*, pp. 576 and 615, and *EPM*, p. 227.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. *EHU*, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Hume describes one species of philosophers that “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 (...) and think themselves sufficiently compensated for the labour or their whole lives, if they can discover some hidden truths, which may contribute to the instruction of posterity”, *EHU*, pp. 3-4. For Hume, modesty becomes in his mature works a systematical maxim against everyone's rationalistic tendencies: “*What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience?* this implies a new question, which may be of more difficult solution and explication. Philosophers, that give themselves airs of superior wisdom and sufficiency, have a hard task, when they encounter persons of inquisitive dispositions (...) The best expedient to prevent this confusion, is to be modest in our pretensions; and even to discover the difficulty ourselves before it is objected to us. By this means, we may make a kind of merit of our very ignorance” *EHU*, pp. 28-29. Cfr. also p. 47.

