

Hume and Literature as Moral Philosophy*

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Resumo: Em anos recentes um número expressivo de filósofos tem defendido que a Literatura é parte do estudo da Filosofia Moral. Eles argumentam, principalmente com relação a novelas, em razão de suas características narrativas, que essas obras contêm pensamento moral que objetiva convencer racionalmente ao se constituírem como formas de instrução emocional. Neste trabalho, eu gostaria de oferecer uma resposta à pergunta sobre se David Hume em sua filosofia prática está comprometido com tal visão das relações entre a Literatura e a Filosofia Moral e se ele pensa que seja adequado usar as técnicas normalmente consideradas pertencerem à Literatura no seu ofício de filósofo moral. Minha resposta será negativa.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia Moral, Literatura, David Hume.

Abstract: In recent years, an expressive number of philosophers have defended that literature is part of the study of moral philosophy. They argue, mainly in relation to novels, in reason of their narrative features, that these works contain moral thinking that aims to convince rationally by being a form of emotional instruction. In this paper, I would like to give an answer to the question about whether David Hume in his moral philosophy is committed to such a view of the relation between literature and moral philosophy and whether he thinks fit to use the techniques normally considered to pertain to literature in his labour. My answer will be negative.

Key-words: Moral Philosophy, Literature, David Hume

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“-And, alas! How always known no principle to supply as a duty what the heart was deficient in.”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (p.327, Penguin).

In this work I would like to give an answer to the following question: Does Hume in his moral philosophy employ the means that have been recently made explicit by philosophers who defend that literature is moral philosophy? To answer this question it will be important, firstly, to give an account of what are the means mentioned. This I will do in the first part of my paper. In the second part, I will address the main question here proposed: the relation between Hume’s moral philosophy and a certain perspective of thinking on literature, or about one type of literature. I would like to make clear at the start that my main interest here is not to discuss the merits of the view of those who maintain that some literature is moral philosophy.

Literature as Moral Philosophy

In recent years philosophers have been calling attention to some procedures that writers, especially novelists, use to achieve their aims in writing. I would like to mention three such philosophers: Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum and Alice Crary¹. It is easier to understand the conception of the possibilities of literature in relation with moral philosophy when one plots it against the view criticized by those philosophers. This view has been nicknamed “the prevalent view”². In a nutshell, this is the view that literature with its specificities can be *useful* to moral philosophy, instrumentally useful.

¹ Cf. Diamond: “Anything but Argument?”; “Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum”; “Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is” in: *The Realistic Spirit, Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1995). Nussbaum: *Poetic Justice, The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1995); *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, Oxford UP, 1990); and Crary: “Does the Study of Literature Belong Within Moral Philosophy? Reflections in the Light of Ryle’s Thought” in: *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol.23 N° 4, October 2000.

² Cf. Diamond (“Having a Rough Story”, p.372) and Crary (*op.cit.*, pp.315-24) for a detailed presentation of this view, specially in relation to D. D. Raphael.

The view holds that literary texts can be useful for moral philosophy because they might contain explicit arguments in favor of certain moral theories or conceptions of morality. Literary texts may also be of importance for moral philosophy as far as they present and even explore certain ideas in a more free and unencumbered context, ideas which, if well articulated and put in the form of explicit arguments, are the subject-matter of moral theorizing. Moreover, literary works can be extremely important for moral philosophy, according to the “prevalent view”, when we find in them the treatment, the characterization, and the description of particular actions, of particular characters, all which constitutes the true material for the theorist of morality to work on, so that they may have a clearer understanding of human conduct in their theorizing, and consequently be freed from the dangers of superficiality in relation to human life.

This “prevalent view” of the relationship between literature and moral philosophy clearly involves a specific conception about the nature and purposes of moral philosophy. As a matter of fact, it is because of this conception that this view relegates literature, according to its critics, to a true *secondary* position, even though the defenders of the view would discuss this qualification, arguing eventually that the position is not secondary, given that it is an important position and actually the only possible when the issue is morality. The conception in question is that it is moral philosophy that contains the true contents of moral rationality *par excellence*. Moral philosophy is, from this point of view, the intellectual enterprise that is involved exclusively with *arguments*, with reasoning in which we pass from certain assertions to some other assertions. On what morality is, and on what constitutes its foundations, the differences between, for example, Hume and Kant are understood to stand only in different and distinct assertions and arguments, via inferences, concerning them. So far, this view of moral philosophy, as is clearly surmisable, is committed to a wide spread and common understanding of what rationality comes to. Rationality is commonly taken to require the exclusion of all types of emotional involvement, requiring that one leaves out of consideration capacities specifically emotional, in general, emotional answers to circumstances. For this conception, it is

only important that there be arguments, discourses in which one finds structured arguments and formal and material inferences³.

Which are, then, the literary procedures that would point towards something different from what the “prevalent view” says about the relationship between literature and moral philosophy? What is the alternative conception? How can it prove itself? One formulation gives an important hint to what is involved in a different conception: “(...) The domain of rational moral reflection is wider than the domain of argument”⁴. The other type of conception maintains that, in a Rylean style, “the training or habituation of *feeling* plays an essential role in the growth of moral understanding”⁵. The relevant literary procedures are, then, accordingly, these related to sentiments. However, they are these which do not simply provoke emotions, but rather *direct* our emotional responses and are capable therewith to produce rational conviction and be therefore a form of moral instruction. So, literature, as literature, or even in reason of what is peculiar to its form, to the type of discourse or text it is, may contain its own moral thinking. This not as the “predominant view” would have it, and also not in the vacuous sense that the author who would be willing to write in accordance to this view would have to exercise his reasoning powers. The literary procedures, proper to literature, which may contain moral thinking, are the narrative strategies which establish a standard of affective reactions that can lead to a rational conviction that a determined manner of looking at certain areas of human life is better or the correct one. So, for instance, the novels by Jane Austen provoke emotional responses when we are presented with distinct situations and characters, which lead to an appreciation of what is an adequate sensibility, a proper pride, a critical susceptibility to being persuaded, and a way of relating to others without undue interference. The novel takes us, through distinctive emotional responses, to identify some standards in our own lives that are only visible because of our

³ Cf. Diamond, *op.cit.* p.368; and Crary, *op.cit.* p.316. Kant seems to be very clear on the point: “Morality cannot ... be based on any pathological principle, neither on a physical nor yet on a moral feeling. Moreover, to have recourse to feeling in the case of a practical rule is quite contrary to philosophy. Every feeling has only a private validity, and no man’s feeling can be apprehended by another. If a man argues that ‘he feels in himself that it is so’, his argument is a tautology. His feeling can have no value for others, and the man who once appeals to his feelings forswears all rational grounds” (*Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield, London, Methuen, 1979; p.38).

⁴ Cf. Crary, *op.cit.* p. 318.

⁵ Cf. Crary, *op.cit.* p. 315.

emotional engagement with the novel. The moral contribution of the novels, as literary works of art with their own features and modes, lies with the understanding they offer of the important moral elements of our lives. In reading the novels we trace the standards in our emotional responses, which makes us better able to understand the story and our own lives⁶. However, this bettered understanding is not one in which what is in the forefront is a pure *intellection*.

I would like to quote two comments that illuminate the scope and nature of what is involved in this type of understanding. To be sure, to clarify what they have to do with a particular type of moral theory requires much more than what I intend to do in this paper. The first comment is by Gilbert Ryle and the second by Iris Murdoch.

However pivotal it may be to the notion of a proper human being that he has some capacity, however slight, to produce and follow proofs of propositions; or to give and accept reasons for propositions; or to draw and concur in inferences from propositions; still surely it is not only for his puny, modest or glorious accomplishments in this dry and chilly propositional arena that we grade his life as a man's life as distinct from a brute's life, an infant's life or an idiot's life (...). Surely men differ from lions and infants in being liable to sillinesses, stupidities and wrong-headednesses other than scholastic ones, and in being capable of being judicious in other ways than judicial ways⁷.

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When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reaction and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly

⁶ Cf. Crary, *op.cit.* p.330.

⁷ Gilbert Ryle *Critical Essays* (Collected Papers, Vol 1, Thoemmes, Bristol, 1990) pp.416-7, *apud* Crary, *op.cit.* p. 319.

elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision⁸.

Hume and Moral Philosophy

Four points will be dealt with in order to get at an answer to my initial question. Firstly, I shall comment on a text by Hume where he seems to be dealing exactly with what is occupying me in this paper. This will function more as a starter.

In his work on the foundations of morality, after countering the skeptics and clarifying that he will reveal to us the "true origin" of morality through a search of its universal principles, Hume turns to benevolence in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. This "social virtue" does not seem to require, according to Hume, any proof that it is *estimable*. It would suffice to remind us of the meanings of those epithets that we find in every language, such as sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent. For Hume, these are the terms that are used to express the highest praise human nature is able to get. And after giving as examples Pericles and Juvenal, Hume stops in his strides and censures himself in the following manner.

But I forget, that it is not my present business to recommend generosity and benevolence, or to paint, in their true colours, all the genuine charms of the social virtues. These, indeed, sufficiently engage every heart, on the first apprehension of them; and it is difficult to abstain from some sally of panegyric, as often as they occur in discourse or reasoning. But our object here being more the speculative, than the practical part of morals, it will suffice to remark, (what will readily, I believe, be allowed) that no qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. These, wherever they appear, seem to transfuse themselves, in a

⁸ Iris Murdoch "Vision and Choice in Morality" in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 30 (1956) p.39, *apud* Diamond, *op.cit.* p.374.

manner, into each beholder, and to call forth, in their own behalf, the same favourable and affectionate sentiments, which they exert on all around⁹.

Hume's point in the passage seems to be clear¹⁰. His purpose, as a researcher of human nature, is not to "paint" the charms of human social virtues, but rather to explain their nature from a speculative point of view, that is, from the perspective of theory. But then natural questions are: when Hume reminded us of what was said and done by Pericles and Juvenal, was not Hume occupying himself with the "practical part of morals"? And how does function such a reminder in this context? And if Hume's main goal is theoretical, why reach a point where one has to censure oneself for having taken another tack? Was Hume tempted by such an approach more than was acceptable in his own eyes? And if he is now getting away from the art of the painter, is he thereby getting closer to doing the job of the anatomist? I will not be giving answers to each of these questions. I propose to turn the attention to the place where Hume presents the distinction here appealed to and which is at the basis of Hume's presentation of two manners one can approach the task of doing philosophy in his first *Enquiry*. Let us deal, then, with this second point, where Hume says what is his conception of the task as a whole of philosophy.

In the first section of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume distinguishes two "species" of philosophy. He says:

The one considers man chiefly as born for action; and as influenced in his measures by taste and sentiment; pursuing one object, and avoiding another, according to the value which these objects seem to possess, and

⁹ Hume, Section 2 ("Of Benevolence") of *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975; ed. P.H. Nidditch); pp. 177-8.

¹⁰ M.A. Box has a different view of what Hume is up to at this point: "Initially this [reminder] 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 the discussion of benevolence is that it did indeed reflect his intentions" (*The Suasive Art of David Hume*, Princeton University Press, 1990; p.243).

according to the light in which they present themselves. As virtue, of all objects, is allowed to be the most valuable, this species of philosophers paint her in the most amiable colours; borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence, and treating their subject in an easy and obvious manner, and such as is best fitted to please the imagination, and engage the affections. They 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 views of glory and happiness, direct our steps in these paths by the soundest precepts and most illustrious examples. They make us *feel* the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments; and so they can but bend our hearts to the love of probity and true honour, they think, that they have fully attained the end of all their labours¹¹.

But there is also another species of philosophy, or of manner of doing philosophy.

The other species of philosophers consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavour to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners. They 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 behaviour. They think it a reproach to all literature, that philosophy should not yet have fixed, beyond controversy, the foundation of morals, reasoning, and criticism; and should for ever talk of truth and falsehood, vice and virtue, beauty and deformity, without being able to determine the source of this distinctions¹².

The first species of philosophy Hume says is “easy and obvious”, and the second, “accurate and abstruse”. And a bit later in the section Hume uses the analogy

¹¹ Hume, Section 1 (“Of the Different Species of Philosophy”) of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975; ed. P.H. Nidditch); pp. 5-6.

¹² Hume, *op.cit.* p.6.

already implied to make the point in question and declares what place he wants to occupy. He says he wants to make the work of the “anatomist” which will be of service to the “painter”. “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”¹³.

Hume seems to prefer to be taken as an “anatomist”, and not as a “painter”, and this means to be taken as a *metaphysician*¹⁴ in opposition to what we nowadays would call “pamphleteers” of the virtues, as Francis Hutcheson – *as it seemed to Hume* – who recommended and practiced a certain “warmth in the cause of virtue”¹⁵.

We can say, therefore, that up to this point, on the face of it, we should give a *negative* answer to my initial question. Let’s get to the third and last point I am going to discuss. How does Hume intend to produce *conviction* in relation to his moral philosophy? Let me clarify the meaning of this question.

The author of the *Treatise* had as his main goal to offer his readers a “knowledge of man” that would come as the result of the introduction of “the

¹³ Hume, *op.cit.* p.10.

¹⁴ Cf. Michel Malherbe’s comments on this text: “It must be observed that the more Hume builds up the merits of the easy philosophy written for the polite society or *l’honnête homme* – Shaftesbury’s or Hutcheson’s philosophy – the more he increases the need for the abstract study of the human mind (...) This text [the one under discussion from Section 1] is well known, and very instructive, if we heed the balance that Hume is seeking to strike. It asserts the need and right of rational and systematic philosophy, to study not only the powers of human understanding, but also the principles of human life. There is no ambiguity on this point: the science of morals itself should be dealt with in a systematic manner. (...) At first sight, Hume might seem, by contrast, to have chosen the easy philosophy in this work [the second *Enquiry*] (and an easy style that emulates the spirit of dialogue writing), rather than the speculative philosophy. We might think, then, that he intended the operation of the speculative philosophy to be postponed until the appendices. Would Hume have lowered his ambitions in this way, and moved to this more modest conception of philosophy, one much nearer to Shaftesbury’s specification? I think not” (“Hume and the art of dialogue” in: M.A. Stewart & John P. Wright (eds.): *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 201-23), pp.213-4.

¹⁵ Cf. M.A. Stewart: “Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First *Enquiry*” in: Millican, Peter (ed.): *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002), pp.67-95; specially pp.73-6. The general tenor of Stewart’s paper is in line with the position adopted in the present one, but the most impressive claim he makes is the following: “If the associations of the ‘easy’ philosophy are derogatory and anti-intellectual – though its contents varies – then the ascription to Hume himself of the dictum of ‘Nature’ must be a reversal of his intended sense. ‘Be a Philosopher; but amidst all your Philosophy, be still a Man’ (PE 7; E 9) is the *poet*’s attitude to philosophy that he repudiates” (p.91). M.A. Box views this text from a different perspective. After referring to Pope’s “Epistle to James Cragg...,” lines 12-13: “But candid, free, sincere, as you began, / Proceed – a Minister, but still a Man”, Box comments on Hume’s text: “This passage could serve as a diagnosis of the failings that doomed the *Treatise* and can give us insights into Hume’s disowning of his first book. Hume had come to believe that the science of the *Treatise* had not been quite ‘human’ enough” (*op.cit.*, p.47).

experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects” or “the application of experimental philosophy to moral subjects” (T p.XVI). The goal was “to explain the principles of human nature” (T p.XVI)¹⁶. In this vein, Hume could be interested in producing the sort of conviction that is typically linked to the satisfactory *explanation* of a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of morals, and this in so far as he discovers its “foundations”, that is, its “principles” or main causes.

However, Hume seems to be worried with his work as a philosopher in another way as well. He also seems to be interested in a certain type of *assessment* of the result of his work. At the end of the *Treatise*, Hume maintains, as against Hutcheson, that “sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions” (T p.618) [NB: the “chief” and not the only] and comments: “Those who resolve the sense of morals into original instincts of the human mind, may defend the cause of virtue with sufficient authority; but want the advantage, which those possess, who account for that sense by an extensive sympathy with mankind. According to the latter system, not only virtue must be approv’d of, but also the sense of virtue: And not only that sense, but also the principles, from whence it is deriv’d. So that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good” (T p.619). And in this manner, according to Hume, “all lovers of virtue (...) must certainly be pleas’d to see moral distinctions deriv’d from so noble a source, which gives us a just notion both of the *generosity* and *capacity* of our nature” (T p.619). That is, Hume seems *to recommend* his system, because according to it the “source” of morality is *noble*. Hume seems to be saying not only that his system is the correct one from the point of view of explanation, but also that it is a *satisfactory* position to hold, that his explanation of the principle of sympathy is “advantageous” because it reveals it as intrinsically satisfactory to us, as “noble”. How can an “anatomist” do this? Should not he be worried only about truth? However, it seems that this “noble source” is not merely any sort of supplementary result of the explanatory goal, a sort of plus obtained in the work of explaining. This *assessment* looks like, in the hands of Hume, a manner of showing the relevance of the system of explanation being offered. What is Hume

¹⁶ “T” is for *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978; ed. P.H. Nidditch).

thinking he is doing at this point, an effort that has been taken as a “reflective endorsement” account of the normativity of morals?¹⁷

Nonetheless, Hume does at this point precisely what he later repeated in the second *Enquiry*, that is, in a kind way censors himself for getting out of the track.

But I forbear insisting on this subject. Such reflections require a work a-part, very different from the genius of the present. 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 ‘tis necessary the objects shoul’d be set more at a distance, and be more cover’d up from sight, to make them engaging to the eye and imagination (T pp.620-1).

What seems clear, then, is that Hume again insists on the importance of the anatomist for the painter with his *practical morality*, a science that can then be “more correct in its precepts and more persuasive in its exhortations” (T p.621)¹⁸.

The final answer we reach then has to be that (1) even though Hume seems to have been *tempted* by a way of proceeding which is not that of the anatomist; and (2)

¹⁷ Cf. Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996), *passim*.

¹⁸ M.A. Box sees the second *Enquiry* as Hume’s most accomplished attempt to bring together the defense of certain philosophical positions with the employment of appropriate literary resources in a larger project of “anatomizing” and “painting” the virtues. Box claims that through the means of a certain presentation of historical data, anecdotes and quotations, Hume is able to “stimulate” sentiments and inculcate morality, because “they depict characters and situations that can stimulate calm passions in us as abstract discussion cannot”. So, “through his allusions in the second *Enquiry* Hume incorporates into his accurate investigations some of the affective value of history. Nowhere else are his anatomical procedures and belletristic purposes so seamlessly joined” (*op.cit.*, p.242). However, this still seems to be the presentation of particular examples so that they *help* to convince on the basis, as it were, of their own intrinsic appeal, as models only. That is also why in part Box asks in the continuation the question on the “painterly recommendation” and refers to a literary form which is “catalogue poetry”: “Hume’s advancement of old verities is well integrated into the exposition of his abstruse tenets. His emphasis is on anatomy, but he makes his findings support the old verities (...). However, this is recommendation of virtue by argument. What about painterly recommendation, and how is this activity integrated into a series of arguments? We have already noted that his use of historical illustrations both substantiates his points and serves to arouse the desired calm passions. Moreover, he sets these illustrations within a particular literary structure that serves both the purposes of expositing tenets and of portraying the charms of virtue. Hume presents the virtues to us systematically by means of a catalogue (...). We commonly associate the catalogue as a literary form with ancient poetry (...)”. (*op.cit.*, pp.247-8).

because he does not attempt to clarify the nature of the procedure which points to the “advantage” of his explanation of the principle of sympathy, Hume in fact intends that (3) his text, his type of writing, convinces by appeal to a rational *intellectual* reflection, that his writing should be understood and should convince because of the application of the *understanding* to his theses and doctrines. Therefore, the answer we judge proper to give to our initial question is *negative*.

So, even if Hume in the first *Enquiry* ended Section 1 suggesting that he would be happy if he could “unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty”, and that even more happiness would result from a “reasoning”, though in an “easy manner”, that would “undermine the foundations” of “abstruse philosophy”, this can in fact be achieved through “the only catholic remedy”, which is “fitted for all dispositions; and is able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom”, and this unique remedy is “accurate and just reasoning”¹⁹.

Coda

A last point should be dealt with in order to help to round up my argument. How bears what Hume says in the famous “Of the Standard of Taste”²⁰ on my question?

To begin with, one should not forget the purpose of that piece and the manner Hume intends to address the topic of a *standard* pertaining to criticism and possibly to morals. Hume says this about the point: “But as our intention in this essay is to mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment, it will be proper to give a more accurate definition of delicacy (...)” (ST p.234). So, it is a work intending to increase our *understanding* of this vexed topic.

If we turn now to the use Hume makes of names such as Homer and Fénelon, we first get the point that presumably good literature gets it right, from the point of

¹⁹ Hume “Of the Different Species of Philosophy”, pp.12, 13, 16.

²⁰ In: --- : *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (ed. by Eugene F. Miller: Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987), pp.226-49. I will quote from this work using “ST” followed by page number in this publication.

view of morals, in the *general*, not necessarily in the *particular*. And he explains why:

It is indeed obvious, that writers of all nations and all ages concur in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, veracity; and in blaming the opposite qualities. Even poets and other authors, whose compositions are chiefly calculated to please the imagination, are yet found from HOMER down to FENELON, to inculcate the same moral precepts, and to bestow their applause and blame on the same virtues and vices. This great unanimity is usually ascribed to the influence of plain reason; which, in all these cases, maintains similar sentiments in all men, and prevents those controversies, to which the abstract sciences are so much exposed. So far as the unanimity is real, this account may be admitted as satisfactory: But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals may be accounted for from the very nature of language. (...) HOMER'S general precepts, where he delivers any such, will never be controverted; but it is obvious, that, when he draws particular pictures of manners, and represents heroism in ACHILLES and prudence in ULYSSES, he intermixes a much greater degree of ferocity in the former, and of cunning and fraud in the latter, than FENELON would admit (ST p.228).

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Hume's view is that literature may *please the imagination*, with its portraits of virtue and vice, more easily in the general than in the particular, facilitated then by the "very nature of language", and *thereby* a piece of literature might avoid losing, and this is the point in question, *aesthetic value*. At the beginning of his essay, Hume is pointing out the variety of appraisals of aesthetic value, and with the comparison of Homer and Fénelon he is able to present incipiently his view of such a variety. When at the end of the essay he addresses the "celebrated controversy concerning ancient and modern learning", Hume comes back to Homer, *the author*: "The want of humanity and decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, even sometimes by HOMER and the GREEK tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances, and gives modern authors an

advantage over them”(ST p.246). However, it seems that we shouldn’t think that Homer’s artistic merit is in peril, because Hume allows that “a man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which no wise resemble them”(ST p.245). There is one type of case where we get “eternal blemishes” for a work of art, this is when the heart of the author is possessed by principles of “*bigotry or superstition*”. “Where that happens, they confound the sentiments of morality, and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue” (ST p.247). But - and this is what we should take notice of - these defects detract, in Hume’s ongoing discussion, from “the value of those composition” (ST p.246) or from “the merit of their noble performances”, as he said of the ancient Greeks.

This fits well with a point of general importance Hume makes elsewhere in the essay. Hume claims that types of writings and “performances” have different goals. He says that “every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end. The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, and of *poetry to please by means of the passions and the imagination*” (ST p.240, my italics). So, what we get is the view that we can be so pleased by the works of literature when, in case this is the point in question, they get morals right. Thus far the examples, even in their particulars, *illustrate* what we could well know with a developed “delicacy of taste” by other types of experience.

However, an indication of how Hume sees *his* task concerning the issue of a standard of taste comes with his discussion of where we do find and what are the features of “true judge[s]” or “critics” with “the true standard of taste and beauty” (ST p.240). He utilizes a distinction in stating what *his purposes* are, that between “questions of fact” and “of sentiment”. He intends to deal with a *question* “of sentiments”, that is, *about* sentiments, because what he wants to do is to *prove* that it is the *sentiments* which have to be of a sort in view of the fact that we possess standards of taste and beauty.

Hume argues as follows. Where there is doubt about whether a particular person is endowed with “good sense and a delicate imagination”, he claims that the situation is the same as with other disputes amenable to the understanding. And to solve them we “must produce the best arguments” that we can invent, necessarily “acknowledg[ing] a true and decisive standard to exit somewhere, to wit, real existence and matter of fact”, and we “must have indulgence to such as differ from [us] in [our] appeals to this standard”. But what cannot be easily disputed, according to Hume, is the fact that someone with good sense and a delicate imagination is “valuable and estimable”, this must be “agreed in by all mankind” (*loc.cit.*). Thus his expressed goal: “It is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have *proved*, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others” (ST p.242, my italics). It is *about* how this taste in fact gets to the point of being acknowledged by this “universal sentiment”, an opinion in fact, of all of us that *Hume* wants to speak. He wants to

explain how and why only some of us develop a “just sentiment” (ST p.243)²¹, this being, none the less, a fact acknowledged to be such by all of us.

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²¹ If we understand this “just sentiment” as related to the *moral* sentiment of the common point of view, as seems reasonable, we could perhaps be willing to see a structural similarity between the workings of the imagination when Hume describes how we imaginatively take the common point of view to produce moral pronouncements on the basis of a special feeling (“Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them control our passions: But they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste” [T 586]) and the workings of the literary imagination (Hume calls it “invention” in “Of Standard of Taste”, p.240) to elicit the desired moral-emotive appreciation of situations defended by the literature as moral philosophy conception (cf., on the first topic, Rachel Cohon: “The Common Point of View in Hume’s Ethics” [*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.LVII, No 4, December 1997; pp.827-50], specially pp.836-9. She calls it “the adjustment of emotion as the result of the sympathetic use of the imagination” [p.838] and says it involves “a habit of performing [a] imaginative exercise” [p.847]). However, this would be of no help with our question, because it seems that for Hume it would still concern what happens with the *author* as she intends to produce a work supposedly to be understood in a certain manner, it would amount to a requirement of morality on the author (things would not change, if we maintained that this is what is intended the readers should go through in reading the work, which is what the defenders of the literature as moral philosophy conception also defend). Hume is engaged, in his explanation of how some of us get to feel the moral sentiment, with a theoretical account of the nature of the phenomenon of morality, one that pertains to the foundations of morality as he conceives of it. This does not seem to be related to a type of writing which has recourse to narrative strategies to produce emotional engagements that are to convince of certain determinate views of what is good and fit morally, as it is claimed Jane Austen, for instance, does. When Hume addresses himself to the specific question of how to convince a “bad critic”, he suggests a procedure of attention-guidance through appeal to examples (he also defends the importance of “established models”, cf. ST p.235): “When we prove, that the same principle [an avowed principle of art which can be illustrated by examples] may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive or feel its influence: He must conclude... that the fault lies with himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse” (ST, p236). This is the case of what is requisite to make one able to perceive what, perhaps in reason of its intricacy and subtlety, is difficult to see in the object, as with Sancho Pansa’s kinsmen verdict on the quality of the wine they tasted. And what Hume wants is to *explain* it to us.

None the less, even if, in relation to Hume, one accepted that the imagination plays a similarly crucial role in morals and in literature, that role does not seem to be the same in reason of the different goals of these “productions”; presumably in morals we should be able to get at certain moral pronouncements, whereas in literature it is still a question of enjoyment and pleasure even when the work is seen through the moral lenses. It seems to be, in relation to *Hume*, as Christopher Williams puts it *a propos* the role imaginative literature can play in the cultivation of our moral sensibility: “... We might have expected Hume to say that works of imagination have a role to play in the evolution... of our moral sensibility. To acknowledge this role, we do not need to suppose, as Martha Nussbaum has done, that literature purveys fine-grained moral insights that are not independently available. This is a strong view, and it raises difficult questions about why the content of these insights must have a literary vehicle. A more modest, and adequate enough, view of the moral role of literature results if

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we note that imaginative enjoyments, because of their relative freedom from practical exigency, allows us to entertain sensibility-altering viewpoints that we might not otherwise occupy. Reading a literary work can be like listening to the king's fool, though we should not think that some unwelcome news has to be conveyed to the king (or queen). The very liberty of the mind at play, the mind without ulterior agenda, advances our moral refinement" ("False Delicacy", p.246, *in*: Anne Jaap Jacobson [ed]: *Feminist Interpretations of Hume*, The Pennsylvania State U.P., 2000, pp.239-62).