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INVENTING SOCIETY: ANIMALITY AND IMAGINATION IN HUME

Abstract

This article examines how Hume engages with the notions of animality and imagination in his account of the origin of human society. I argue that, although Hume treats the formation of society as a development specific to the human species, he grounds it in principles shared with other animals such as need and self-preservation. Central to this account is the imagination, which enables human beings to adapt means to ends in response to necessity and to invent society – thus surpassing other species and asserting their dominance over nature. For Hume, in contrast to traditional philosophical accounts, it is not Reason that elevates humanity, but rather imagination: an animal faculty we share with other species and which he conceives as the cornerstone of knowledge.

Keywords: Enlightenment, imagination, invention, animal reason, convention.

Inventando a Sociedade: Animalidade e Imaginação em Hume

Resumo

Este artigo examina como Hume mobiliza as noções de animalidade e imaginação em sua análise da origem da sociedade humana. Sustentamos que, embora Hume considere a formação da sociedade como um desenvolvimento específico da espécie humana,

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ele a fundamenta em princípios compartilhados com os animais, como a necessidade e a autopreservação. No cerne dessa explicação está a imaginação, que permite aos seres humanos adaptar meios a fins em resposta à necessidade e inventar a sociedade – superando outras espécies e afirmando seu domínio sobre a natureza. Para Hume, em contraste com as concepções filosóficas tradicionais, não é a Razão que distingue a humanidade, mas a imaginação: uma faculdade animal compartilhada com outras espécies, e que ele concebe como o alicerce do conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Luzes, imaginação, invenção, razão animal, convenção.

Hume generally displays little interest in detailing animal behaviour or the various forms of cunning that animals display. When he does address the topic, he restricts himself to ordinary observations that are sufficient for the purposes of his argument. More often than not, a simple behaviour exhibited by an animal is enough: a dog that «avoids fire and precipices, that shuns strangers, and caresses his master»², and that tracks its prey by scent and responds when called by name³. These examples illustrate the limited scope of what we learn about dogs in Hume's work, despite the fact that the dog is the animal to which he most frequently refers.

Although Hume's portrayal of animals may appear limited from the standpoint of natural history, it is through a philosophical lens that the precision and significance of his analyses become fully apparent. This article seeks to explore how Hume mobilizes the theme of the animal to illuminate key questions within his *science of man* – a term he introduces at the opening of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). I argue that the animal serves as a methodological tool for deepening our understanding of human nature, aligning with the approach identified by Jean-Luc Guichet in relation to Rousseau and the French materialists⁴. My focus here is specifically on how Hume employs the figure of the animal to address the question of the origin of human society, a theme he develops in the third book of the *Treatise*.

By engaging with this theme, the article contributes to Enlightenment animal studies, a field that has, until now, overlooked the relevance of Hume's work⁵. It also adds to ongoing research on the role of animality in the thought of the Scottish philosopher. I adopt the perspective advanced by Claude Gautier, who contends that the animal plays a critical role in illuminating the nature of Humean scepticism⁶. In line with Gautier, I distance myself from substantialist interpretations of Hume's

² D. Hume, THN 1.3.16.5. References to *A Treatise of Human Nature* will be cited as follows: THN book, part, section, paragraph.

³ D. Hume, EHU 9.3. References to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* will be cited as follows: EHU section, paragraph.

⁴ J.-L. Guichet, *Rousseau, l'animal et l'homme. L'animalité dans l'horizon anthropologique des Lumières*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2006.

⁵ See the "Animal" issue of the journal *Dix-huitième siècle*: BERCHTOLD, J. & GUICHET J.-L. (dir.), « L'Animal des Lumières », *Revue Dix-huitième siècle*, 42 (2010). I would also draw attention to H. HASTINGS, *Man and Beast in French Thought of the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, London 1936; and E. de FONTENAY, *Le Silence des bêtes*, Fayard, Paris 1998.

⁶ C. Gautier, « La raison des animaux (section IX) », in C. ETCHEGARAY & P. HAMOU (dir.), *Lire l'Enquête sur l'entendement humain de Hume*, Vrin, Paris 2022, pp. 213-227.

writings on animals – readings that focus on cataloguing similarities and differences between humans and animals solely to reaffirm human superiority⁷.

As we shall see, Hume's interest in animals moves in a different direction: what matters to him is the parity between humans and animals, which serves as a touchstone for rejecting the philosophical systems of tradition⁸. In the case of the origin of society, this parity supports the claim that the human species differs from others in ways and for reasons that are strictly animal in nature. Society is conceived as an invention of the imagination – a faculty shared with other species. For Hume, this invention operates as a remedy, allowing the human species to overcome the precarious condition in which it finds itself in the natural world. On their own, human beings lack the necessary means to satisfy their many needs and to face the dangers posed by many other species whose natural constitutions surpass their own. From this perspective, society originates in animality: it is an artifice crafted by an animal species for the purpose of shielding itself from the threats inherent in nature⁹.

This article has two parts. First, I examine how, in Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume presents the human being as an animal whose imagination – driven by the pressure of need – gives rise to society through the invention of indirect means of satisfaction. Society is thus understood as an artificial response to a natural mismatch between needs and resources, emerging not from pure reason but from imagination, grounded in experience. In the second part, I analyse the consequences of this account, particularly the analogy between instinct and institution: while instincts provide animals with natural procedures of satisfaction, institutions function as artificial procedures for humans, sustaining an open-ended spiral of invention and desire that underlies the development of culture, politics, and knowledge. This second part draws on the work of authors such as Gilles Deleuze and Luiz Roberto Monzani.

Society as remedy: a progressive and animal invention

In the third book of the *Treatise*, the human being is portrayed as a creature who, like all animals, is driven by needs and equipped with resources to meet them. As Hume observes, the lion requires a substantial amount of food to satisfy its appetite; yet this food constantly eludes it, as it must be hunted. While the lion's needs are numerous, they are offset by the natural advantages of its species – agility, courage, arms, and force¹⁰. A balance exists between its needs and its capacities. According to Hume, this proportionality is found across a wide range of animal species, including herbivores such as the sheep and the ox, which, though lacking

⁷ T. L. Beauchamp, «Hume on the Nonhuman Animal», *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 24:4 (1999) 322-335 ; D. G. Arnold, «Hume on the moral difference between humans and other animals», *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 12/3 (1995) 303-316.

⁸ Hume, THN 1.3.16.3.

⁹ Our analysis gives particular attention to Part 2 of Book 3 of Hume's *Treatise*.

¹⁰ Hume, THN 3.2.2.2.

the lion's strengths, have moderate appetites «and their food is of easy purchase»¹¹. No species, he suggests, possesses more resources than it needs, nor is burdened with more needs than its resources can accommodate – except the human species.

Unlike other species, the human being suffers from a profound mismatch between needs and resources. Of «all the animals, with which this globe is peopled», Hume writes, «there is none towards whom nature seems, at first sight, to have exercised more cruelty than towards man, in the numberless wants and necessities, with which she has loaded him, and in the slender means, which she affords to the relieving these necessities»¹². This represents an «unnatural conjunction of infirmity, and of necessity»¹³. The condition is termed *unnatural* because it defies the general pattern observed in nature, where species exhibit a proportional balance between their needs and their capacities. Yet paradoxically, in the case of the human species, this very imbalance appears as something entirely *natural*, insofar as it expresses a defining characteristic of the species itself.

According to Hume, this condition appears from the very beginning of human history. Before the advent of society, the human being is a «barbarous, necessitous animal»¹⁴. On the side of needs, «the food, which is required for his sustenance, flies his search and approach, or at least requires his labour to be produced»; he must also secure clothing and shelter to protect himself from the elements¹⁵. On the side of resources, «he is provided neither with arms, nor force, nor other natural abilities, which are in any degree answerable to so many necessities»¹⁶. Confronted with this disadvantageous condition, the human being is compelled to invent new means to meet needs that far exceed what his natural constitution can provide. Human survival, then, hinges on the capacity to generate resources that are not originally given, but must be fabricated through artifice.

Hume thus reengages with the classical theme of the human being as an animal deprived of natural advantages, yet endowed with reason, through which he develops tools and asserts dominance over other animals¹⁷. The originality of Hume's account, however, lies in the fact that he does not explain tools as the product of a uniquely human rationality. Instead, he traces them back to the imagination – a faculty shared with other animals and grounded in the fundamental needs of living beings. The capacity to invent, in this view, stems less from a privileged cognitive faculty than from a pressing necessity. Ultimately, it is need – not an extraordinary mental faculty – that accounts for the distinctiveness of the human species.

According to Hume, since artifice arises directly from the needs of human nature, it is, in a certain sense, natural (a theme already explored by several scholars

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ D. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, London 1889 [1757], p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See the myth of Protagoras (Plato, *Protagoras*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, part 1, Belles Lettres, Paris 2002, p. 320), as well as Thomas Aquinas's *De Regimine Principum*. François Sigaut offers a commentary on Aquinas in F. Sigaut «Les outils et le corps», *Communications*, no. 81 (2007), p. 9.

of Hume's work¹⁸). This holds true for all forms of invention, from the simplest – such as clothing and shelter – to the most complex, such as political institutions. For Hume, political institutions are artifices invented by the human species to ensure its preservation. In this light, society emerges as an invention of the utmost importance. It is «by society alone» that the human being «is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them»¹⁹. Although society entails a multiplication of needs, such as the artificial desires that arise within social life, human being may still take satisfaction in their own creations: his capacities continually expand «and leave him in every respect more satisfied and happy, than it is possible for him, in his savage and solitary condition, ever to become»²⁰.

According to Hume, society would never have come into being were it not for the relief it offers from the unfavourable condition of the human species in comparison to other animals. Even in its most rudimentary form, society proves advantageous over working in isolation, as it provides «a remedy for these three inconveniences»²¹: first, «his force is too small to execute any considerable work»; second, «his labour being employed in supplying all his different necessities, he never attains a perfection in any particular art»; and finally, since his strength and success are not always constant, «the least failure in either of these particulars must be attended with inevitable ruin and misery»²². The union of forces, the division of labour, and mutual assistance in times of need, these are the immediate advantages that society confers upon human beings²³.

Hume nonetheless recognizes that the establishment of society faces a fundamental obstacle: the instability of possessions, which can only be resolved through the convention of private property. Without this remedy, how could the mutual exchange of services, which is crucial to any benefit society might offer, ever take place? As he puts it, «after the agreement for the fixing and observing of this rule [of private property], there remains little or nothing to be done towards settling a perfect harmony and concord»²⁴.

If society is understood as a remedy for the species' original precariousness, then the convention of private property serves as a remedy for the obstacle of the instability of possessions. Hume argues that this obstacle stems from the conjunction of two natural factors: the limited generosity of human beings and the scarcity of goods in nature²⁵. Hume does not reduce human action to self-interest, as if human nature were inherently selfish²⁶. Yet this does not prevent him from acknowledging

¹⁸ On the continuity between the artificial and the natural, see, for instance, F. de O. Salles «Natureza e artifício: Hume crítico de Hutcheson e Mandeville», *Discurso*, 50:1 (2020) 65-79.

¹⁹ Hume, THN 3.2.2.3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hume, THN 3.2.2.12.

²⁵ Hume, THN 3.2.2.16

²⁶ Hume's position contrasts with that of Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714). See the appendix entitled «Of Self-Love» in Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

that we are inherently partial, that we tend to prefer ourselves, our families, and our neighbours over strangers²⁷. As Philippe Saltel puts it, « it is less selfishness than partiality that characterizes human beings »²⁸. In this respect, there is a « limited generosity »²⁹ (grounded in the principle of sympathy) that differs from a universal benevolence toward all members of the species. If our generosity had no limits, if we made no distinction between our own interests and those of others, there would be no need for such a remedy³⁰. Generosity alone would suffice to preserve the stability of possessions, since it would prevent one person from depriving another of their goods.

Yet limited generosity is not the only natural factor that leads to the necessity of inventing an artifice. According to Hume, the scarcity and mobility of external goods also play a decisive role. In a context of material abundance, the mobility of goods would cease to pose a problem, and with it, the very instability of possessions would disappear³¹. But since this is not the case, remedies are needed, namely, conventions, or in other words, the rules of justice, a virtue that Hume explicitly defines as *artificial* in Book III of the *Treatise*³². These rules are « clearly a human invention (and in that sense, artificial), and they rest upon an agreement among individuals (and in that sense, conventional) »³³.

Hume explains that although the conventions upon which social cohesion and stability depend are artificial, they are nonetheless natural³⁴. This is because the invention of artifices is so necessary to the human species that it may rightly be considered natural. In this regard, Hume emphasizes in his discussion of the rules of justice that mankind is an « inventive species »³⁵, and argues that when an invention « is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as anything that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflection »³⁶. Hume thus sets aside the traditional natural law distinction between laws of nature and positive laws³⁷. For him, laws are both artificial and natural: no law precedes the emergence of society, and the laws that arise with it are natural insofar as they are the product of interests rooted in human nature. In this sense, he asserts that although the « rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary* »³⁸.

²⁷ Hume, THN 2.1.11.

²⁸ Philippe Saltel in the notes to his French translation of Book III of the *Treatise* (*Traité de la nature humaine. Livre III*, trad. Philippe Saltel, Flammarion, Paris 1993, p. 259). Hume also addresses this topic in the appendix to the second *Enquiry*.

²⁹ Hume, THN 3.2.2.16

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ C. Etchegaray, *David Hume. L'esprit sensible*, Éditions Belin / Humensis, Paris 2018, p. 118.

³⁴ Hume, THN 3.2.1.19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Despite his critique of natural law theory, Hume nonetheless shares certain points of convergence with that tradition. On this, see S. Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Thus, the emergence of society should not be conceived as a means of securing supposedly natural rights (for instance, the notion that the right to property is innate and that government exists merely to preserve it). Hume inverts this line of reasoning: it is the very concept of a right to property that arises from society, not the reverse. In the absence of society, there is no notion of right at all. As such, this idea is the product of a general scheme that takes shape gradually, through necessity and the accumulated experience of social life. The same is true of the notion of duty.

For Hume, society and its institutions do not emerge directly from nature or reason. They are the outcome of a gradual process of reflection, one that is fundamentally practical, as it involves exploring and testing means capable of addressing human needs. Primitive in its origins, society becomes increasingly complex as needs are met and multiplied, and as conventions are progressively improved «as the society enlarges»³⁹.

In this regard, Hume observes that the convention of property rights «arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it»⁴⁰. He points out that the same process applies to the development of language and to the adoption of gold and silver as instruments of exchange – both of which are, likewise, products of human convention⁴¹. For Hume, the establishment of society cannot be reduced to the signing of a contract *ex nihilo*, as if individuals could immediately grasp both the terms of the agreement and the necessity of complying with them. On the contrary, Hume seeks to demonstrate that conventions are rooted in experience, in the ideas and passions that arise in response to concrete circumstances. In this context, transgression plays a constitutive role: it is by experiencing the harmful effects of violating emerging norms that individuals come to appreciate the value of adhering to them. Over time, this process gives rise to a set of habits that prove effective in given situations and that gradually grow more complex. In this sense, Hume departs from the contractualism of thinkers like Hobbes: the agreement between individuals does not consist in a formal pact or promise, but rather emerges from «collective experience – precisely because individuals come to see that, by acting in a certain way (without the need for prior deliberation), the practice improves, becoming more effective or more advantageous»⁴².

Since agreements are established gradually, Hume observes that there exists a primordial form of association among individuals that provides the first experiences of life in common: the family. According to him, it is within the family that the imagination becomes attuned to the advantages of social existence: « In a little time, custom and habit operating on the tender minds of the children, makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society, as well as fashions them by degrees for it, by rubbing off those rough corners and untoward affections,

³⁹ Hume, THN 3.2.2.14. Although a convention is an artifice, it arises from nature and evolves naturally, such as the different languages in the world. (THN 3.2.2.10). On Hume's relation to contractualism, see F. BRAHAMI, "Hume, contractaliste? Famille, droit, pouvoir dans la philosophie de Hume," *Philosophique*, 12 (2009) 79-92.

⁴⁰ Hume, THN 3.2.2.10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² C. Etchegaray, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

which prevent their coalition»⁴³. Hume grounds the formation of the family in a basic natural impulse (the attraction between the sexes) without which the initial perception of life in common as beneficial would never arise. For him, just as later for Buffon (and against Rousseau), the human being has never lived in complete isolation⁴⁴. The family has always been present, and it is through the experience of familial life that individuals first come to grasp the benefits of social existence. As Hume writes, «in order to form society, it is requisite not only that it be advantageous, but also that men be sensible of these advantages»⁴⁵.

Hume argues that the awareness of social advantages does not stem from abstract study or rational deliberation, but from the concrete experience of family life⁴⁶. In this context, he identifies two fundamental bonds: first, the sexual appetite between the sexes; and second, the parents' concern for their common offspring⁴⁷. These natural ties offer individuals an initial experience of the benefits of human association, furnishing the imagination with ideas that will become crucial to the progressive establishment of conventions and, ultimately, of society itself. Once the imagination becomes sensible of the advantages of social life, it begins to perceive new relations of cause and effect, relations that enable the invention of new means for addressing emerging needs. It is on this foundation that the most complex social and political institutions are gradually built.

The central role of animality in this narrative is unmistakable. The origin of human society is explained by conceiving the human being as an animal: a creature endowed with specific natural traits and exposed to external threats. It is therefore unsurprising that the «first and original principle»⁴⁸ of society does not rest on what we commonly associate with human undertakings, namely, abstract rational reflection. Instead, this principle is grounded in what is shared with all animal species: sexual attraction and parental concern for offspring. It is the pressure of necessity that drives the emergence of human society. The rationality that intervenes in the origin and progressive development of society is the rationality of the imagination: a practical, animal rationality that seeks means to satisfy needs, and does so through the gradual learning that experience affords.

The traditional notion of understanding is challenged: in Hume's philosophy, it is no longer possible to draw a clear separation between understanding, on the one hand, and the senses, imagination, and the body, on the other. As João Paulo Monteiro explains, rather than such a separation, what we find is a connection, and even a precedence, of imagination over understanding⁴⁹. Understanding is «a

⁴³ Hume, THN 3.2.2.4.

⁴⁴ G.-L. L. Buffon, «Discours sur la nature des animaux», in: *Œuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 2007, p. 487.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Hume, THN 3.2.2.4.

⁴⁹ The relation between imagination and understanding has been the subject of sustained debate among Hume scholars (see T. Costelloe, *The Imagination in Hume's Philosophy: The Canvas of the Mind*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 2-7). Monteiro's interpretation resonates with perspectives also found in readings of Hume proposed by Gilles Deleuze, Yves Michaud, and Jean-Pierre Cléro.

modification of the imagination itself, a certain capacity to engage with the world that emerges [...] from the most primary layers of the subject, conceived as its origin and condition of possibility»⁵⁰. Hence Hume's assertion that reason «is nothing but a kind of instinct», and that habit, the foundation of knowledge, «is only one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin»⁵¹. These claims are difficult to grasp in their full significance without acknowledging the priority of imagination over understanding and reason. This conception of imagination (as a fundamental operation of the association of ideas essential to survival) is key to Hume's defence of the continuity between human and animal intellectual faculties. After all, the animal reason developed in dedicated sections of both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* is, strictly speaking, none other than Humean imagination itself, rooted in habit and nature⁵².

Instincts and institutions

The proximity between society and animality in Hume is explored in the 1953 text «Instincts and Institutions», where Gilles Deleuze describes institutions as «procedures of satisfaction», much like instincts⁵³. Instincts are understood as natural means of satisfaction, insofar as they consist in the organism's spontaneous responses to external stimuli: reactions that enable it to fulfil its tendencies and needs. This set of responses constitutes what Deleuze calls a «specific world», that is, a world proper to the species: instincts are shared by all individuals of a given species. Institutions, by contrast, while also functioning as procedures of satisfaction, are artificial rather than natural. In this context, Deleuze writes that the subject institutes an original world between its tendencies and the external world, a world in which the artificial means of satisfaction «liberate the organism from nature by subjecting it to something else, and transform the tendency itself by inserting it into a new universe [*milieu*]»⁵⁴. These are not natural responses to stimuli, but rather the institution of an entirely new world, wherein tendencies and needs are reconfigured: marriage, for instance, releases the individual from the need to seek a partner, but that need is transformed into others, as new obligations and roles emerge within the instituted world.

Despite the distinction between instinct and institution, Deleuze argues that both represent «organized forms of possible satisfaction»⁵⁵. For him, a natural tendency is transformed when it is introduced into a new *milieu*, the institutional universe. This is his way of highlighting the continuity between the natural and the artificial that is central to Hume's account. As Hume notes regarding convention, the

⁵⁰ J. P. Monteiro, «Tendência e realidade em Hume e Freud», *Revista Discurso*, vol. 3.3 (1972) 149.

⁵¹ Hume, THN 1.3.16.9.

⁵² For further discussion of Hume's conception of animal reason, see D. Galvão, «La rationalité animale: David Hume sur l'humain et l'animal», *Siglo Dieciocho*, n. 2, (2021) 103–123.

⁵³ G. Deleuze, «Instincts et institutions», in: *id.*, *L'Île déserte*, ed. David Lapoujade, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2002, p. 24. This text was originally published as the introduction to *Gilles Deleuze, Instincts et Institutions*, in the *Textes et documents philosophiques* series, edited by G. Canguilhem and curated by Deleuze himself, Classiques Hachette, Paris 1953.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

constraint is not «contrary to these passions; for if so, it could never be entered into, nor maintained; but it is only contrary to their heedless and impetuous movement»⁵⁶. Elsewhere, Hume makes it clear that conventions serve to satisfy natural tendencies, not by repressing them, but by redirecting them: «All they can pretend to, is, to give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner, than by their headlong and impetuous motion»⁵⁷.

Deleuze highlights the priority of social institutions over properly political ones. To understand Hume, we must indeed regard political institutions as secondary to social institutions. There is, for Deleuze, no doubt that institutions such as the government «are secondary – that they already presuppose institutionalized behaviours, that they derive their utility from a properly social sphere, which ultimately finds its principle in the relationship between the social and the tendencies it organizes»⁵⁸. Marriage and private property are among the conventions Deleuze identifies as antecedent to the establishment of government, as Hume himself makes clear in Book III of the *Treatise*. There, Hume argues that without the convention of private property, one cannot overcome what he considers the principal obstacle to the preservation of society: the ease with which possessions are transferred from one person to another – in short, the instability of property. The institution of private property thus signifies the creation of a new, original, and artificial world – one that, like instinct, gives rise to a «organized forms of possible satisfaction»⁵⁹. Within these organized forms, behaviour becomes institutionalized, and the passions are satisfied in indirect, mediated ways⁶⁰.

Government emerges later, yet it is not absent from Hume's narrative of the origin of society. In Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume devotes a brief section to the question of government's origin – one that, as expected, approaches the issue from a practical standpoint, emphasizing its utility. Once again, the institution is conceived as a product of the artificial world in which natural tendencies are transformed and passions are satisfied obliquely. In broad terms, the role of government is to uphold the conventions already established within society⁶¹. Hume refers to these conventions as the rules of justice (what Deleuze describes as the institutionalization of behaviour) which prove crucial to the maintenance and preservation of the social body.

For Hume, government is artificial in nature, as it arises as a remedy for a condition that threatens the stability of the social order. The source of this threat lies in human nature itself – specifically, in the tendency to prefer immediate over distant goods. As Hume puts it, men «are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote»⁶². Individuals may be tempted to violate the rules of justice (to seize another's property, for instance)

⁵⁶ Hume, THN 3.2.2.9.

⁵⁷ Hume, THN 3.2.5.9.

⁵⁸ G. Deleuze, «Instincts et institutions», art. cit., p. 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Hume, THN 3.2.5.9.

⁶¹ Hume, THN 3.2.7.6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

because they fail to recognize that such transgressions, while immediately beneficial, may ultimately lead to the collapse of society and the loss of future security. Since human nature cannot be changed, Hume argues, all «they can do is to change their situation»⁶³. The solution, then, lies in creating conditions under which the immediate interests of certain individuals align with the enforcement of justice. Motivated by the desire to preserve their social standing (an immediate concern) these individuals assume responsibility for upholding the conventions. Largely «indifferent to the greater part of society», these guardians of the law «have no interest, or but a remote one, in any act of injustice; and being satisfied with their present condition, and with their part in society, have an immediate interest in every execution of justice, which is so necessary to the upholding of society»⁶⁴.

Thus, the establishment of government serves to preserve society and maintain social order. Ultimately, its function is to «render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote»⁶⁵, allowing individuals to act in accordance with the rules of an artificial world in which natural needs are satisfied through indirect or oblique means. «More precisely, the role of public authority in this case is to make present the idea of a cost great enough to outweigh the appeal of antisocial behaviour»⁶⁶. Like society itself, government is understood as a product of the imagination, an invention whose efficacy lies in its capacity to meet the fundamental needs of the human species.

From this perspective, if government exists among humans but not among other animals, it is, according to Hume, because the mismatch between means and ends in the human species has made such an artifice necessary. Government is conceived as an artifice rooted, above all, in the imagination. Driven by necessity, the imagination draws upon experience to devise solutions, operating according to the logic of animal reason. Indeed, Hume does not propose a difference in kind between humans and animals, but rather a difference in degree: animals, too, possess imagination, which functions in response to their needs. Hence the parity of reason to which Hume refers in his essay *Of the Immortality of the Soul*: «The powers of men are no more superior to their wants, considered merely in this life, than those of foxes and hares are, compared to their wants and to their period of existence. The inference from parity of reason is therefore obvious»⁶⁷.

This raises the inevitable question: what, then, remains of the distinction between human and animal? According to Hume, the human species is distinguished by the complexity of its imagination and the excess of its needs – two traits that are intimately and intrinsically connected. The mismatch between means and ends in human life

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ R. Kuntz, «Hume: A teoria social como sistema», *Kriterion*, 52:124 (2011) 462.

⁶⁷ D. Hume, «Of the Immortality of the Soul», in: *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1987, p. 593. In this essay, Hume argues that if we accept the mortality of animal souls, then by analogy, we must also accept the mortality of the human soul (*ibid.*, p. 597). For Hume, if the immortality of the human soul were real, its powers ought to be proportionate to the needs it experiences – not only in this life, but across all previous lives of the same soul. Yet, he contends, this is not the case: experience reveals a proportionality between the powers of the human soul and the needs of this present life.

«creates the urgency of a controlled action»⁶⁸, the effectiveness of which depends on the individual's familiarity with the surrounding world. It is through imagination that this familiarity is acquired: by discerning patterns in experience, the imagination draws connections between objects, projects past associations into the future, generates new combinations, and ultimately guides action. Yet, according to Hume, the human being is not the only animal capable of recognizing regularities in experience and using them to its advantage – without this capacity, no animal could survive⁶⁹.

Although imagination, in Hume's philosophy, is not an exclusive attribute of the human species, it is through imagination that something distinctive arises – one that sets humans apart from other animals by a difference of degree, not of kind. In humans, imagination attains such a degree of complexity that, according to Hume, it allows them to overturn their original disadvantage relative to other animals. Theological doctrine holds that man was created as a superior being, made in the image and likeness of God, and that all other species were created for his nourishment⁷⁰. Hume, by contrast, offers a different account: humanity became superior through a victory whose merit is, at best, ambiguous. It was the precariousness of the human condition in nature that led to the refinement of the imagination, and, with it, to all subsequent achievements, not only in the domain of mechanical arts, but also in the sciences⁷¹. In short, humanity was not born superior; it became superior in order to survive. From a Humean perspective, it was precisely human fragility that compelled individuals to unite in society, thereby setting in motion an endless chain of invention – of new means and ever-expanding needs⁷².

Although imagination and society serve to preserve and ease the condition of the human species, this does not mean that humanity is able to overcome its original feature: the mismatch between means and ends. For Hume, human beings do not remain content with the satisfaction of their basic needs; once these are met, new ones inevitably emerge. He speaks of an ever-expanding multiplication of needs: «If the reason of man gives him a great superiority above other animals, his necessities are proportionably multiplied upon him»⁷³. No matter how far the human species advances in technology and science, the proliferation of needs offers no relief: «his whole time, his whole capacity, activity, courage, and passion, find sufficient employment in fencing against the miseries of his present condition, and frequently, nay almost always are too slender for the business assigned them»⁷⁴.

One need gives rise to another, just as one invention sets the stage for further inventions. Once the first piece of clothing is crafted and the first shelter constructed, the techniques employed become subjects of new inquiries and experiments, which in turn lead to further innovations. Each new invention serves a novel purpose, and

⁶⁸ D. Deleule, «Anthropologie et économie chez Hume: la formation de la société civile», in: C. Gautier (dir.), *David Hume et la question de la société civile*, PUF, Paris 2001, p. 23.

⁶⁹ For the pragmatic aspect of animal reason, see Hume, THN 1.3.16.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, *Genesis*, I:26.

⁷¹ D. Hume, «Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences», in: *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, op. cit. For Hume, the sciences derive from the imagination just as much as the mechanical arts.

⁷² Hume, «Of the Immortality of the Soul», in: op. cit., p. 593.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

that purpose, in time, is likely to become a new necessity. A piece of clothing, for instance, may come to be valued not merely for protection, but for the admiration it inspires. What emerges is a logic of the superfluous, whereby human beings, by nature, are driven to desire and to produce constantly beyond what is strictly necessary. Luiz Roberto Monzani uses the notion of a « taste for the superfluous » to describe what he sees as the darker side of the Enlightenment: an anthropology shaped not by the image of reason emancipated from its many tutelages, but by the insatiability and indeterminacy of human desire⁷⁵. This taste for the superfluous, he writes, is «a spring inherent to man, one that operates continuously, in a temporal geometric progression, as knowledge advances»⁷⁶.

From this perspective, what distinguishes the human being from other animals is the unfolding of desire. In animals, there is a closed sequence of three terms – need, desire, and satisfaction. In humans, by contrast, this sequence is open-ended: it begins and ends with desire. Desire gives rise to an indeterminate need, which is followed by imaginative elaboration, the realization of the object, fleeting satisfaction, and once again, desire. This open series breaks « the near-perfect correspondence that exists in animals between need and fulfilment, and installs in its place a new kind of cycle, an indefinite spiral of transitory satisfactions and ever-renewed desires, each one giving rise to the next in a continuous and unending progression»⁷⁷.

In Hume's account, human society emerges not from a rupture with nature, but from the continuous unfolding of natural tendencies under the pressure of necessity. From the fragility of the human condition arises the need for artifice, and from the imagination, shared with other animals yet reaching unparalleled complexity in humans, comes the gradual invention of social and political institutions. The passage from instinct to institution does not erase the natural roots of human nature, but reorganizes them within an ever-expanding artificial world. In this way, Hume offers a profoundly naturalistic account of human society – one in which the human being remains, at every stage, an inventive animal.

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⁷⁵ L. R. Monzani, *Desejo e prazer na idade moderna*, Editora da Unicamp, Campinas 1995, p. 50.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

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