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Politics without a subject: David Hume on general rules

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ABSTRACT. In this article, after having described the role and functioning of general rules and of customs by Hume, I will show that the centrality of these in his political reflection leads to a denial of the identification of man as the subject, intending with this concept the union of the conceptual pair *subjectum* (support of personal peculiarity) and *subditus*. Hume doubts the presence of an element that is able to impose itself on man, subduing him to its own will; the man himself, if he tries to impose a norm on himself, attains only useless sufferings.

1. Introduction

Hume's skepticism brings him to refuse to trust any norm with mathematical certainty that purports to regulate either nature or politics; both fields are domains of matters of fact, for which it is not possible to find rules that are always valid. For Hume, norms are descriptions of regular repetitions taking place: they are not an account of necessary phenomena. It is the constant repetition that defines laws and not the other way around. This counts both in the cognitive as in the political field: respect for a law is not a consequence of its intrinsic necessity, as the law does not derive from a government to which we necessarily must obey for a transcendent or rational necessity or for an ancient promise of submission. Power, understood as the probability that an element A is the cause of an element B¹, cannot be perceived and its existence is, for this reason, doubted by Hume²; just as, in the cognitive field, it is the repetitiveness of nature that brings us to the formulation of scientific laws, which imply a hypothetical causality that is not demonstrable, so in politics it is the repetitive inclination of man that leads to a hypothetical authority or the power of a government and of its laws. It is the custom and tendency to be obedient that mostly influences our actions, not a sovereign monopoly of force.

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1 «power consists in the possibility or probability of any action, as discover'd by experience and the practice of the world», David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton, M. J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 204.

2 See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green, T. H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 4:50–60.

2. The general rules: analogy and imagination

General rules are considered throughout all three books of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, as they concern the modality in which men produce reasoning, and they are implied in actions and behaviors. Such rules reveal human nature—which is inclined to repetition—the construction of series that follow one another connecting similar cases³: if there is a multiplicity of similar cases, the causes of our actions and thinking are moved to the background and they are replaced by habit, which is able to originate certainties and passions, even though they have not been caused.

The two fundamental passions to which Hume devotes ample space in the *Treatise* (pride and humility) are originally the result of the relationship of three elements⁴ (two ideas and one impression), among which our pleasure or sorrow are instigating causes. However, due to the existence of habits of thought, an instigating cause⁵ may not necessarily be present: passions can simply arise from two ideas⁶. The procedure is very similar when we consider causality: here, from an impression A we derive an idea, a belief in an object B. The judgment that derives B from A is not an analytical judgment, nor is it a synthetic a priori one (which can be only found in mathematics and geometry), since the knowledge of such relationship is not so much caused by the repeated experience of $A \rightarrow B$, as by the constant experience of the conformity of the future in comparison of the past: in other words, nature repeats itself and only through such repetitiveness does man infer the necessity that “if A always B”⁷. Therefore the

3 *Treatise*, 234.

4 See Section II-V of Book II, Part I (*Treatise*, 182–190).

5 We must [...] make a distinction betwixt the cause and the object of these passions; betwixt that idea, which excites them, and that to which they direct their view, when excited. [...] The first idea, that is presented to the mind, is that of the cause or productive principle. This excites the passion, connected with it; and that passion, when excited, turns our view to another idea, which is that of self. Here then is a passion plac'd betwixt two ideas, of which the one produces it, and the other is produc'd by it. The first idea, therefore, represents the *cause*, the second the *object* of the passion», *Treatise*, 183.

6 «When an idea produces an impression, related to an impression, which is connected with an idea, related to the first idea, these two impressions must be in a manner inseparable, nor will the one in any case be unattended with the other. 'Tis after this manner, that the particular causes of pride and humility are determin'd. The quality, which operates on the passion, produces separately an impression resembling it; the subject, to which the quality adheres, is related to self, the object of the passion: No wonder the whole cause, consisting of a quality and of a subject, does so unavoidably give rise to the passion. To illustrate this hypothesis, we may compare it to that, by which I have already explain'd the belief attending the judgments, which we form from causation», *Treatise*, 189–190.

7 I do not linger here on the discussion that tries to establish if for Hume

causal link does not derive its necessity from reasoning or deduction⁸. However, it is based on the experience of the similarity between past and future, that is, on something that cannot be demonstrated. In the case of the passions and *belief* in the necessity of a causal link, they are not the result of reasoning, but they are the effect of a tendency and habit. The necessity that we feel existing in the bond between two elements (for instance between fire and loose wax or between wealth and pride) is due to human nature, which tries to produce a series of repetitions which bring about *general rules*.

Habit acts on the human mind through imagination, a faculty that turns impressions into ideas and whose procedure is free, devoid of fixed rules⁹; if we observe it, we see that it is possible to identify some constants and to notice that it usually gathers impressions to create bonds of resemblance, bonds of contiguity in space and time, and of cause and effect¹⁰ among similar elements. The inferences of imagination are influenced by habit because the ideas produced receive such a strong vivacity that they are able to provoke the belief that the inferences will be confirmed by experience. Their vivacity equates these ideas with impressions, granting them the faculty to influence human passions.¹¹ From the perception of an object A and an object B, the mind is suited by custom to firmly believe that after the appearance of the first one, the second one should follow to the point of reaching the conviction that they are indeed tied up by a necessary relationship, which we believe follows a rule. However, no perception corresponds to the idea that we have of such necessity; therefore, it is a production of our mind and not an element that our senses can perceive.¹² The same procedures are at play in the formation of general rules that lead humans to create habits that influence our behavior. These rules are not

there is a nature outside the I or not. I hold that, to the goals of the present article, that topic is not relevant, because this article focuses on the normativity that crosses the act of humans and not on the adherence of objects to the causal law. For a possible close examination I refer to the following texts: Brian A. Chance, "Causal Powers, Hume's Early German Critics and Kant Response to Hume", *Kant-Studien* 104 (2013): 213–236; Winkler P. Kenneth, "Hume on Scepticism and the Senses", in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume's Treatise*, ed. D. C. Anslie, A. Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015), 135–164.

8 The deduction is possible only in *a priori* elaborations by imagination and by intellect, elaborations that are characterized for reaching propositions whose contrary is contradictory. The experience of "If A then B" and "If A then C (\neq B)" and their related propositions are not contradictory; if nature changes its course, if it does not repeat itself anymore, it does not contradict itself.

9 «nothing is more free than that faculty: But we are only to regard it as a gentle force, which commonly prevails», *Treatise*, 12.

10 *Treatise*, 13.

11 *Treatise*, 82.

12 «Here then it appears, that of those three relations, which depend not upon the mere ideas, the only one, that can be trac'd beyond our senses, and informs us of existences and objects, which we do not see or feel, is *causation*», *Treatise*, 53.

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dictated by reason, but they are the instruments through which man can extend principles and thoughts beyond the datum and present reasons by following the repetitiveness that characterizes nature as a whole.¹³

This is the tool that man possesses for the use of his abilities with a goal-oriented purpose to satisfy his needs:¹⁴ an inclination to repeat the same intellectual operation or to reproduce the same action.¹⁵ Custom is a principle of human nature,¹⁶ but it does not lead us to always behave in the same way: habit is not the eternal reproduction of the identical. For the observer to have the impression of a causal link between two objects, it is not necessary for him or her to have already experienced the same, identical situation; the typical necessity of the causal relationship that connects an object to another does not only occur in case that the observer perceives the same object A, definable as cause of object B, but also in the case of a more generally similar objects and similar conditions. The repetition that allows to reasoning to go beyond the datum does not develop in the terms of a narrow identity, but in terms of similarity: it describes a series of repetitions that follows a rhythm of analogy. While traveling, or considering history, we realize that men and women have altered their own institutions and creations (the way they build residences and the tools that they use) to suit them to given conditions with the purpose of reaching their goals: “Men, in different times and places, frame their houses differently; here we perceive the influence of reason and custom.”¹⁷ Objectives common to all men and women, such as the maintenance and the propagation of human species, can be pursued well only by adapting to existing conditions: general rules are not universal or necessary, but variable. If we perpetuate the reproduction of the identical, we will be reduced to the level of simple instincts, like animals, whose peculiarity consists in being submitted to the power of nature, which forces them to the simple repetition of behaviors and procedures.¹⁸

13 «to the force of this argument I so far submit, as to acknowledge, that general rules commonly extend beyond the principles, on which they are founded», *Treatise*, 353.

14 «Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. [...] [Without the influence of custom] We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation», *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 39.

15 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 37.

16 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 37.

17 Hume D., *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, in David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green, T. H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 4:195.

18 «A man, who has contracted a custom of eating fruit by the use of pears or peaches, will satisfy himself with melons, where he cannot find his favourite fruit [...]. From this principle I have accounted for that species of probability, deriv'd from analogy, where we transfer our experience in past instances to objects which are resembling, but are not exactly the same with those concerning which we have had experience», *Treatise*, 100.

Human beings use “experimental reasoning”¹⁹ and thus are able to use their own knowledge derived from experience, elaborating it and suiting their own tools for the satisfaction of their passions. In turn, these innovations and diversifications become a habit and custom in a brief period of time: the motivations that led to their creation are forgotten and we perpetuate the following of such new precepts.

General rules are not determined to the least detail; they leave space for variations and, unlike instincts, do not have their own cause in themselves. They are the product of the faculty of imagination, which elaborates tools with the goal of resolving our tendencies²⁰, and this establishes them as norms hiding their instrumental character. This is what characterizes human nature: more than reason, it is imagination that identifies it. It is thanks to imagination alone, if men develop the belief that nature repeats itself, and so allow them to extend their faculties over the simple perceptions; only through it do men believe in the necessity of not interrupting the present habits but of proposing them again, in this way, building a chain of analogous elements.

3. General rules: strengthening and correction

The primary role of general rules is the extension of human faculties beyond their justified limits, with our passions and reasoning²¹ bringing order to experience without a stable base, making a systematization of experience that is not grounded on the necessity of certain mechanisms but on the probability that nature will not change its repetitive tendency. Both in the moral and cognitive fields, general rules are essential for the survival of human beings, allowing the production of reasoning that attempts to foresee the immediate future and the establishment of institutions that preserve the species.

In the absence of habit and repeated bonds among similar objects, it would not be possible to reach the conclusion that “those instances, of which we have no experience, resemble those, of which we have experience”;²² there would not be a principle on which the belief in necessity is created; therefore, without repetition, reasoning would be impossible.²³ That is, the procedure through which mind goes over what is immediately present to

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19 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 88.

20 The “tendency” is a desire, an impulse immediately satisfied – following Gilles Deleuze interpretation – by an instinct and in human beings satisfied through institutions; see Deleuze Gilles, *Empirisme et subjectivité* (Paris: PUF 2010).

21 *Treatise*, 192.

22 *Treatise*, 62.

23 It is to note that the elevation of passed experience to criterion for future judgement, namely the belief that tomorrow will resemble to yesterday, it is not in itself a reasoning, but it is the ground of every possible reasoning. See *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 28f.

the senses would be inconceivable. Particularly, causality (the only philosophical relationship to venture beyond the senses, informing us about the existence of objects that we do not see or feel)²⁴ could not occur. Without this ability to project and forecast, it would not be possible for human beings to manage to satisfy their own passions, make inferences,²⁵ or speculate or act in order to achieve a consequence.

Fixed habits cause the formation of stable institutions and constitute that network of use and custom within which every human being already exists and that cannot be described as a system of prohibitions. It is rather a tool to facilitate, thanks to the ability of the imagination²⁶ to arouse a passion lacking its own reason to be,²⁷ the actualization of principles that lead to the vigor²⁸ of such habits. Therefore, we are quite distant from a binary scheme of prohibition and permission, in which the law preserves human beings from their own wickedness or egoism. Hume proposes the idea that a rule is an entirety of habits intended to facilitate the attainment of goals (be they egoistic or prescribed by sympathy) of human beings that work together to generate an equilibrium between the repetitive nature of men and women and the conditions in which such habits are created.²⁹

This never fixed, always imperfect and to be reconstructed equilibrium, implicates the second peculiarity of general rules; they not only have the role of strengthening and facilitating thoughts and action, but they also develop the mutually corrective role to create an order in human relationships and in rational reconstructions. General rules, being the generalization of an individual idea,³⁰ applying the peculiarities of a single experience to different cases will lead to errors and prejudices whose defect does not consist so much in their falsehood (against the truth), but rather in the contrast and contradictions that they cause between other prejudices or beliefs.³¹

The ability of the imagination to generalize is not only applied to identical cases but also to similar elements, sometimes confusing necessary conditions of some effects with other, on the contrary, superfluous conditions that are only accidental;³² in this

24 *Treatise*, 53.

25 See note 14.

26 *Treatise*, 234.

27 *Treatise*, 234.

28 *Treatise*, 192.

29 On this aspect focused Gilles Deleuze; see: Deleuze Gilles, *Empirisme et subjectivité*.

30 «If ideas be particular in their nature, and at the same time finite in their number, 'tis only by custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number of other ideas under them», *Treatise*, 21

31 «An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity; for which reason, tho' the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly very agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertain'd such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind», *Treatise*, 100.

32 *Treatise*, 101.

way, the faculty leads to general rules that confuse the terms in play:

the same custom goes beyond the instances, from which it is deriv'd, and to which it perfectly corresponds; and influences his ideas of such objects as are in some respect resembling, but fall not precisely under the same rule.³³

Only reasoning can counterbalance this excessive amplification of habit, but the very same reasoning is constituted by the cause-effect relationship or by a further general rule. Conflict does not occur therefore among elements of different natures but is always between probability and stronger beliefs and not between possibility and certainty. Error emerges when among our thoughts we ascertain an incongruity, as when two probabilities appear in conflict; the only way to overcome this does not consist in appealing to an absolute truth, but on the contrary in opting for a general rule that brings with itself a degree of greater probability and in relegating to a simple exception the weakest impression, the least vivid thought.³⁴ In the field of experience (of what Hume calls "matters of fact"), every judgment is the result of relationships produced by the imagination thanks to the influence of habit and its relationship with general rules: they are grounded in belief, which must submit to a more or less founded probability, which increases or decreases through other formulated judgments³⁵, and that cannot flow in the field of certainty and truth:

this gradual increase of assurance is nothing but the addition of new probabilities, and is deriv'd from the constant union of causes and effects, according to past experience and observation.³⁶

Certainty is a feeling, provided by the senses and not by reasoning or demonstration: we live using illusions provided by the imagination, without regarding the fact that "all knowledge resolves itself into probability."³⁷

There are no fixed or stable laws, and certainty is replaced by probability, which has to be composed, turning resemblance into identity or contiguity or causes, because of the influence of the modality in which ideas and impressions are conceived. What is given are only singular impressions, and the rest is construction.

The operation of the general rule that exerts itself between correction and expansion does not lead us to exclude the exception from the rule itself, but rather to include it in a new series of repe-

33 *Treatise*, 101.

34 *Treatise*, 101.

35 *Treatise*, 121

36 *Treatise*, 121.

37 *Treatise*, 122.

titions and analogies. In the case of rebellion against a government, resistance overturns and interrupts the habit to obedience. This breach is not the breakdown of a rational order that finds its own justification in logic,³⁸ as it is not the transgression of an original contractual source of political legitimacy. Respecting an established order is not a necessary behavior, as necessity is a characteristic that is always and only attributed by the observer, it is not present in nature³⁹ and neither is it due to the presence of a real authority established by an original transfer of power and enacted by an unbreakable promise.⁴⁰ The (also moral) obligation of subjugation to a government is due to none of this.

If we are to explain constant obedience to a magistrate, we have to question and observe the opinions of men and women, who would never accept the idea that the origin of government consists in an original promise or contract.⁴¹ Loyalty to the magistrate does not consist in a promise or a necessary relationship. Rather, it is a consequence of general rules, thanks to which we extended our maxims beyond the first reason that pushed us to establish them⁴² and that induced us to get use to do something, to repeat ourselves in a regime of analogy, leading human beings to consider the magistrates or sovereigns as authoritative, not in respect of some legitimating promise, but rather because they have achieved their powerful position by inheritance or possessed the throne for a long time.⁴³ In other words, if it is possible to establish an analogy between the actual holders of authority and the predecessors, a similitude allows the imagination of the subject to pass from one to the other without unpleasant and difficult passages.

Rebellion against an established political order is not due to the breaking of some promise or the shattering of a rational regime that, for its own logical strength, should stay unchanged without being submitted to assault. Rebellion is possible, although it is an exception to the general rule of loyalty to authority, exactly because general rules are not laws inscribed in human nature. Such rules simply describe the general tendency to follow habits and customs. Resistance to a sovereign consists in the introduction of an unpredictable variable to a flowing series of analogies. This variable does not linearly correspond to principles through

38 *Treatise*, 101–102.

39 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 77.

40 «the magistrates are so far from deriving their authority, and the obligation to obedience in their subjects, from the foundation of a promise or original contract», *Treatise*, 350; «philosophers may, if they please, extend their reasoning to the suppos'd *state of nature*; provided they allow it to be a mere philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou'd have any reality. [...] But however philosophers may have been bewilder'd in those speculations, poets have been guided more infallibly, by a certain taste or common instinct», *Treatise*, 316–317.

41 *Treatise*, 350.

42 *Treatise*, 353.

43 *Treatise*, 356f.

which knowledge can be extended beyond the simply given.⁴⁴

Rebellion is a sign that theory is not a rigid system of absolute truths to which faith must be lent and that one must adopt.⁴⁵

in this particular, the study of history confirms the reasonings of true philosophy; which, shewing us the original qualities of human nature, teaches us to regard the controversies in politics as incapable of any decision in most cases.⁴⁶

This does not make it a varying and unpredictable element that sometimes surges in a series of analogies that regulate the political life of human beings, simply splintering them. The operation of general rules is corrective not because it excludes what escapes from the planned repetition, decreeing a narrow invariability (even if only on the plan of analogy and not of identity); however, it is because in the actions of men and women, the exception becomes a rule. It does not rest on a binary plane of truth and untruth, in which right and injustice are in originally defined and opposed: knowledge moves in a field of probabilities. Hume accepts the inclusion of exceptions and admits equilibrium among what is more or less possible. Regarding cases of political resistance, their exceptionality is dissolved in two directions: first of all, human history has shown so many examples of rebellion⁴⁷ that it can be considered as a general rule. The exceptionality of resistance is inserted in a chain of usual obedience that, this way, is broken up, but its exceptional nature is darkened and integrated into another canon of behavior, not left to a chaos that could cast a shadow in repetitive order of humans' and nature's procedures. The occurrence of the unexpected is immediately included in a habit that explains it, normalizing it (also predicting its frequent resurfacing),⁴⁸ it is instantly integrated in an order of habits that collides against one another. Nature repeats itself, confirming our reasoning, which is—even though without necessity—grounded on that same repetition: this leaves room for possible subversions in what we take for certain;⁴⁹ we understand ordinary human behavior but nothing prevents it from

44 «we [...] make allowances for resistance in the more flagrant instances of tyranny and oppression. [...] Nor is it [the resistance] less infallible, because men cannot distinctly explain the principles, on which it is founded», *Treatise*, 353–354.

45 «Whoever considers the history of the several nations of the world; their revolutions, conquests, increase, and diminution; the manner in which their particular governments are establish'd, and the successive right transmitted from one person to another, will soon learn to treat very lightly all disputes concerning the rights of princes, and will be convinc'd, that a strict adherence to any general rules, and the rigid loyalty to particular persons and families, on which some people set so high value, are virtues that hold less of reason, than of bigotry and superstition», *Treatise*, 359.

46 *Treatise*, 359.

47 For a detailed study of Hume as historian, see: Spencer K. Wertz, "Hume, History and Human Nature", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 481–496.

48 *Treatise*, 353.

49 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 33

contradicting our expectations.

4. General rules and freedom

The introduction of variation within general rules does not imply for Hume that human beings are, unlike other creatures, free. The nature of human beings, in which tendencies do not seek for their own satisfaction through blind instinctive repetition, but rather through the elaboration of strategies which result from an equilibrium among new habits, does not put him outside a world ordered by blind necessity, in which he intervenes to start a new series of repetitions by grounding it in peculiarities that do not belong to the deterministic reality.

Human beings do not impose themselves on nature within a proper moral order and with justice; their constitution does not separate them completely from natural repetition. In other words, human beings are not free beings intervening in a reality under a narrow regime of necessity. What we consider human “liberty” or “freedom,” that is, the capacity to enter an established order to change its repetitive series, is nothing else than the result of double ignorance: an error in our conception of the necessary and deterministic bond between events and the inability to recognize all the regular connections in which a human action is inserted (without interruptions or breaks). Human beings sometimes act in an apparently unpredictable way, practicing a real interruption of any regular and repetitive behavior, a fragmentation of any analogy with the past; in reality we simply ignore all connections, all general rules followed by the individual. Therefore, when a behavior that is consequence of a till now minor and less evident series, prevails on the principal general rule, when it alters the equilibrium through the more or less hidden breaking in of contrary causes,⁵⁰ an observer is not able to recognize the fluidity of the mutation and he motivates his incapacity to recognize a causal bond asserting that he has been spectator of an action which is not the effect of some determining cause but which is rather free.

The conviction that holds human beings to be entities endowed with liberty opposed to nature that obeys a regime of necessity is a reflex of a common error due to the consideration of the status of the bond between cause and effect. Human beings and nature obey the same type of necessity: the chain of natural causes and the chain of voluntary causes are not separated by the presence or absence of freedom. Necessity is not internal to the cause, as if it were itself bearer of such a determining element. It is rather the effect of the imagination of the observer. This faculty is able to produce such a firm conviction that when human beings reflects on themselves and do not see in their spirits a necessary connection comparable to that which he believes existing

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50 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 71.

among natural objects, they then consider themselves detached from the natural world, in possession of an exclusive characteristic: liberty. Incapable of remembering that necessity is not a quality of the agent or of the effect, but rather of what we consider their relationship to be, we build two different fields, one for human beings and the other for nature: the two kingdoms of liberty and determinism. Eliminating the possibility of freedom implies the elimination of its opposite, which is necessity: these are the results of the beliefs of the human mind. What we seem to know is simply a constant conjunction that we are able or not to foresee, and not the necessity or its contrary, in both cases. Liberty (as the contrary of necessity)⁵¹ and its opposite do not exist: human beings are the same as nature. The fact that human actions appear irregular and uncertain, opposed to natural regularity, does not make them exist on a different level.⁵² The bond between motives and actions has the same regularity as natural developments.⁵³

The ability of human beings to introduce an unexpected element does not make them free beings but only marks a faculty of adaptation in a mutable equilibrium. If human beings simply followed their instincts, there would be no change and they would continue to act in the same identical way, independently from every condition: birds build their nests without adapting to a varied situation, without any assessment and forecast.⁵⁴ The intervention of mutation within a repetitive series is possible only if it does not deal with impulses but custom and general rules, or when human minds expand beyond the given through imagination and habit, which reconstruct resemblance, contiguity, and causation,⁵⁵ producing such a vivacious conception of objects and consequences that we firmly believe them to be able to provoke specific effects despite mutable conditions.⁵⁶ Human beings are different from animals because they are not tied to their instincts: this is what we would think we can conclude. However, reason is not a faculty external to nature. On the contrary, it is a sort of instinct or mechanic power similarly to the blind impulse that induces animals to behave in a perpetual repetition.⁵⁷ What characterizes the human mind is the ability to go beyond the datum and simple perceptions, building series of resemblan-

51 We can talk about freedom only in the sense of the absence of constrictions: *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 79.

52 *Treatise*, 259.

53 «I do not ascribe to the will that unintelligible necessity, which is suppos'd to lie in matter. But I ascribe to matter, that intelligible quality, call it necessity or not, which the most rigorous orthodoxy does or must allow to belong to the will», *Treatise*, 263.

54 «All birds of the same species, in every age and country, build their nests alike: In this we see the force of instinct», *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, 195.

55 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 43

56 See note 14.

57 «the experimental reasoning itself [...] is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power», *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 88.

ces and causalities between them, whose conception can be more or less vivacious, provoking changes or simple repetitions in behavior, according to a resultant emergence from the intersection of different series of habits, reconstructed causal chains, and produced resemblances. We are in a domain not subdued to reasoning and built by belief, imagination, and the general rules, or by the human propensity to produce repetitions and to believe in them, building series whose members are based on each other and not on a cause or tendency. The results of this order are the praxis and the knowledge of human being, which do not originate from the imposition of pure reason external to nature, but they are rather the result of probability, of more or less certain reconstruction, and of already given conditions.

The human mind is a natural element among many others: it does not refer to some transcendent plan and it is not drawn by some liberty. It is rather a simple reaction to human passions and a tool that facilitates their satisfaction. We are then wrong, if we think that reason can command passions and impose on them a moral law or a truly and right order. When we think we are acting reasonably, our behavior in reality is due to a predominant passion, which in this case is calm, quiet, and not expressed violently.⁵⁸ Even if the human mind is able to introduce an unpredictable variable in the development of habits and of general rules, it is not able to produce a metaphysical reality. The only things from which it starts are impressions in their singleness and in their mutual isolation. Everything it reconstructs is only its product: the harmonious order that we think we are reconstructing in science⁵⁹ is not a revealed truth nor a discovery, but only a projection of our belief that allows us to direct our own tendencies.

5. Identity and difference: the absence of the “I”

Hume places the concepts of difference and becoming as prior to those of identity and being because identity is nothing more than a construction of imagination.⁶⁰ Moreover, the source from which such falsification is produced, cannot be understood as a constant “self” always identical to itself: among the flow of impressions there is no stable subject that arises as sovereign. The

58 «Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs. [...] What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent», *Treatise*, 268. About the possibility to have or not a practical reason in Hume, see: Camillia Kong, “Hume and Practical Reason: A Non-sceptical Interpretation”, *History of political Thought* 34 (2013): 89–113.

59 Michel Malherbe, *La Philosophie Empiriste de David Hume* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), 49.

60 «Our chief business, then, must be to improve, that all objects, to which we ascribe identity, without observing their invariableness and uninterruptedness, are such as consist of a succession of related objects», *Treatise*, 167.

identity that is usually attributed to the human mind is “fictitious”⁶¹ and what we are used to calling “I” is nothing else than an entirety of perceptions whose bond is something we have attributed ourselves⁶², building in this way a continuous chain of thought⁶³ that results in being identical to itself. There is no impression of the “I” and of its identity that is a demonstration of the fact that it is a construction. Philosophy must thus be empiricist: it has to be related to experience, obliging it to open and destruct identity and to radically resolve it into the difference.⁶⁴ Personal identity is the result of an operation of imagination that reflects on itself, on thinking,⁶⁵ thus perceiving a facility in the passage among the consideration of different perceptions and allowing the emergence of the feeling of necessity taking into consideration causal bonds as the effects of the same “I” and its faculties.⁶⁶ It is at this point of the discussion that Hume introduces the comparison between the mind and a theater (deprived, however, of scene, stage, or any other structure) where the perceptions incessantly follow one another, combining themselves to each other: “There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different.”⁶⁷ The fact that this theater has no scenes and materials is a marker that the same powers of the mind are not perpetually identical⁶⁸ and therefore that imagination, memory, and reason are not faculties in the sense that they do not constitute a transcendental structure laying between the subject and his object. They do not systematize knowledge and practice. They are rather attitudes to pursue a purpose in a determined way, similar to instincts that have been born and developed in nature. Therefore, as birds mechanically build identical nests – even though not implying a specific faculty of their mind in this action (however, only implying a tendency that is repetitively updated without variation) – human beings stir inside nature through similarly instinctive procedures that may also be constant but which cannot

61 *Treatise*, 169.

62 *Treatise*, 169.

63 «our notion of personal identity, proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected ideas», *Treatise*, 169–170.

64 Malherbe Michel, *La Philosophie Empiriste de David Hume* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), 193.

65 «Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion», *Treatise*, 171.

66 In this last passage, memory plays an central role, because it allows to extend the chain of causes to every moment we remember: «In this view, therefore, memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. 'Twill be incumbent on those, who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity, to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our memory», *Treatise*, 171.

67 *Treatise*, 165.

68 «Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment», *Treatise*, 165.

be hypostatized.

6. The Absence of the Subject

Man, as a flow of perceptions, is deprived of any reason that is able to distance him from nature and capable of imposing a proper order; a human mind that results from a specific fold produced by natural processes; all of this makes the formulation of the self as a subject in contrast to objects impossible. Perception, before it has been elaborated and has been transformed into an idea, is pure presentation⁶⁹ without any distance between the object and the subject. Perceptions are singularities in which a perceiving subject and a perceived object are not distinguishable; both emerge in a second moment, as a consequence of the attribution of continuity and coherence to different perceptions. Every piece of information furnished by our senses is at minimum disconnected from any other perceptions that do not already carry within themselves the sign of possible relationships with other impressions. They do not have in themselves, singularly, a necessary bond to other perceptions, even if they are represented as inherent to the same object; as two points contingently connected by a segment are traced in a second moment, the relationship between impressions follows, it is not necessary, and it is a consequence of the attribution of a regularity they do not have.⁷⁰

The centrality of habit and of repetition not only involves the notion of a subject intended to be opposite to the object. Hume also expressly denies other characteristics attributed to this concept, which is reducible to a simple grammatical matter:⁷¹ taking into consideration the central peculiarities that characterize it, we are therefore able to distance Hume from the philosophical tradition identified by Alain de Libera, which gradually identifies the subject of the act, the subject of the inherence of attributes, and the cognitive subject.⁷²

From the beginning, the absence of the cognitive subject is de-

69 With this expression I intend the precedence of the impression in respect to every representation, which presupposes the distance between the thought and its object.

70 *Treatise*, 137.

71 To this is also reduced the personal identity: «The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affair, viz. that all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties», *Treatise*, 171. Neujahr put in relation the Humean analysis on identity and the which one on time: Philip J. Neujahr, "Hume on Identity", *Hume Studies* 4 (1978): 18–28.

72 The path toward this identification is the subject matter of the research of Alain de Libera; in particular: Alain de Libera, *L'invention du sujet moderne. Cours du Collège de France 2013–2014* (Paris: Vrin, 2015). More extensively: Alain de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I. Naissance du sujet* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), Alain de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet II. La Quête de l'identité* (Paris: Vrin, 2008).

terminated by the negation of an identity to which it is possible to submit rational and stable faculties. The denial of the subject as a center of inherence⁷³ excludes the possibility to think of actions and human faculties as attributes of a crucial point (be it a substance or a transcendental synthetic unity). This brings Hume to a tradition that is different from the one that places being prior to becoming and that – following Alain de Libera –⁷⁴ connects Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to Kant:

The notion of *accidents* is an unavoidable consequence of this method of thinking with regard to substances and substantial forms; nor can we forbear looking upon colours, sounds, tastes, figures, and other properties of bodies, as existences, which cannot subsist apart, but require a subject of inhesion to sustain and support them. For having never discover'd any of these sensible qualities, where, for the reasons above-mention'd, we did not likewise fancy a substance to exist; the same habit, which makes us infer a connexion betwixt cause and effect, makes us here infer a dependence of every quality on the unknown substance.⁷⁵

Imagination, memory, and reason are not the faculties of a subject: this concept is replaced in Hume by an “I” that precedes the distinction between subject and object. There are only two uses of the term “subject” expressly accepted by Hume⁷⁶: the first one concerns one of the causes of a passion. The subject of a passion is not the man or woman who feels it, rather it is that thing to which a quality (identified with the second cause of that passion) inheres. With an example, the subject of proud is not the human being proud of itself, rather the cause of that feeling: his propriety, following an example of Hume.⁷⁷ The subject of passion is different from the self, which is on the contrary the *object* of proud⁷⁸ in case that it is related to the *subject* of that passion.⁷⁹

The second use – central for the demonstration of this article – of the term “subject” is that of *subditus*, a man or woman

73 This prevents, in Hume’s intentions, to think of the object as a substance (in particular, see: *Treatise*, 146–147). See also: Jay F. Rosenberg, “Identity and Substance in Hume and Kant”, *Topoi* 19 (2000): 137–145.

74 See Alain de Libera, *L’invention du sujet modern* (Paris: Vrin, 2015), 174–175. See also: Steven C. Patten, “Hume’s Bundles, Self-Consciousness and Kant”, *Hume Studies* 2 (1976): 59–75.

75 *Treatise*, 146–147.

76 I exclude here the use of “subject” in the sense of “argument”, “object of a discussion”.

77 «it appears necessary we shou’d make a new distinction in the causes of the passion, betwixt that *quality*, which operates, and the *subject*, on which it is plac’d. A man, for instance, is vain of a beautiful house, which belongs to him [...]. The quality is the beauty, and the subject is the house», *Treatise*, 183. For examples concerning other passions: *Treatise* 201, 214–215.

78 See quote in note 6.

79 «the subject, to which the quality adheres, is related to self, the object of the passion», *Treatise* 189.

subjected to an authority:⁸⁰ therefore Hume denies the tradition that relates the subject to the *subjectum* (the support of personal peculiarity); he only admits its meaning deriving from *subjectus* in the narrow sense of being subjugated.⁸¹

Refusing to identify the subject with the self, avoiding the conception of this as a totally subjugated entity, he leaves space for the possibility of thinking of human beings as a not already and always subjected being: not only subjected by the government, but also by a fixed (even substantial) identity, by an universal and stable description to which everybody must adhere.⁸² Hume does not pose human beings as subjects, in the sense that they are not subjugated to a universal anthropological structure, to some moral or epistemological law; they are not even subjugated to their own consideration, in which there is no impression of themselves. This prevents the antinomy that derives from the desire to write an anthropology that sets man as an object, falsifying him because of the consequent impossibility to describe his being a subject. Hume admits, instead, a science of the human being that is only restricted to the description of his (or her) absence of identity. Man is a subject only if he is subjugated; this however does not entail that the man is always free apart from the aspect of his or her subjection to the magistrate (as if freedom belonged to his private and apolitical space).

The attempt to subjugate his own desire to a rational or spiritual norm is also criticized: such effort is not only painful, but also useless,⁸³ and furthermore it is not the demonstration of liberty imposed by man on his or her life. Hume speaks in this case of artificial behaviors that derive from the split with the analogy and with repetition furnished by custom: they are not manifestations of a strong freedom that ranges inside what is given. They only concern the exasperation of some principles or inclinations that become dominant, subjugating all the other desires and affections.⁸⁴ Human beings cannot impose a norm on themselves or on others.

It is particularly clear in this sense what Hume intends to warn the skeptical philosopher (with whom we may identify Hume himself): skepticism must be limited to the philosophical matters. It must not lead to popular objections with the purpose of placing into question the bases of our daily behavior. Radical doubt is

80 Remaining in the *Treatise*, we can find the following recurrences of the word “subject”, in the sense of “submitted”, “subjugated”, “a person owing allegiance to a king or queen”: *Treatise*, 221, 222, 262, 343, 345, 358, 364, 375.

81 See the entry “sujet” in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, ed. B. Cassin (Paris Le Seuil Le Robert, 2004), 1233–1254.

82 About this, see Étienne Balibar, *Citoyen sujet et autres essais d’anthropologie philosophique*, (Paris PUF, 2011), in particular the introduction (“Avant-propos – Après la querelle”).

83 David Hume, *The Sceptic*, in David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green, T. H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 3:231.

84 *The Sceptic*, 214.

easily swept away not due to solid reasoning, but through life itself. The occupations of daily life will be the agents that will wake up the skeptic from his dream full of questions: the skeptical principles “vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals.”⁸⁵

7. A politics without subjugation

General rules, imagination, and habit, thought of as central factors, lead to a conception of politics as a continuous rebalancing between repetitions, series of analogies, and without reaching a firm center that would be able to bring them (also in a teleological way) to stability and establish a fixed criterion to distinguish what is right and what is wrong.⁸⁶ Norms that regulate relationships among human beings develop independently from any law stipulated by the state or a rational or divine being, and they are not necessarily instituted by a constitution or by a philosophical system. Thus, it is possible to verify the source of obedience to norms without however implying that this obedience presupposes submission or a subject. It is therefore possible to think of a norm invested of a power that does not want to subdue man: the power still remains in his hands,⁸⁷ and it cannot be ceded to a sovereign. Instead of a binary order constituted by the pairs true/false and correct/wrong to which human beings should submit, Hume proposes probability, which totally replaces the possibility of certainty in the cognitive and practical fields. Thus, norms are not an instrument to include or to exclude, legitimate or not, but it is the result of what may be more or less probable. Its purpose is to allow man to proceed over what is simply given, hence strengthening his faculties. In a different way, in respect to the instincts, general rules include any element preventing the consideration of something as a transgression, a glitch among all analogies. These rules are not established to regulate the liberty of the individuals or allow their independence. They are rather the result of human imagination and nature. Obeying them is not a matter of subjugation and breaking them is not a sign of freedom: liberty is not something that should (or not) be folded to the general rules.

Hume’s skeptic and empirical philosophy has dethroned the subject from its grounding position and has made it the product of the general rules themselves, of the imagination and of habits. Nobody can impose on nature to make possible a condition of freedom: general rules are not the product of reasoning and they

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85 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 130.

86 For a summary about the interpretations of Hume as a conservative or as a reformer, see: D. W. Livingston, “On Hume’s Conservatism”, *Hume Studies* 21 (1995): 151–164.

87 «as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion», David Hume, *Of the First Principles of Government*, in *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green, T. H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 3:110.

do not lead to a complete and perfect systematization of society and ethics. Whether it is a matter of liberty, truth, and moral or cognitive order, there is a continuous reconstruction and an equilibrium to be rebalanced; the human mind does not possess principles that could systematize experience. Originally, man is nothing else than a sort of a fold inside the immanence of the processes that characterizes nature, that does not leave a space for certain truths but only an eternal rebalance among probabilities. Thinking politics with Hume implicates the refusal of any element already given to the relationships and to empirical differences, the renouncing of any transcendent plan and the idea of human liberty previous to relationships, to the (violent) interaction of strength among men. Liberty is not an anthropological peculiarity, but it is rather already held within order and equilibrium. It is not even possible to think of an already given subject that enjoys liberty. Even if it would seem that man originally finds himself in the pair *subjectum–subjectus*,⁸⁸ he precedes it: identities and the elements that allow the emergence of that pair of concepts are later constituted. They are only a product of the imagination, which is able to hide the differences and ever-changing flows.

This is the advantage offered by Hume's philosophy: having difference and probability as points of departure for a philosophical reflection on politics, it is possible to trace the birth of identities, showing their fallacy and their mutability; departing from the relationships, the subject appears as a simple product. We are very far from the idea of a subject grasping the truth. We are instead in the field of mutability, in which human beings stir among probability and balances, in which norms do not forbid but rather strengthen their faculties.

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88 «We naturally suppose ourselves born to submission», *Treatise*, p. 355.

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