Chapter Two

Hume

The Meaning of Empiricism

The history of philosophy has more or less absorbed, more or less digested, empiricism. It has defined empiricism as the reverse of rationalism: Is there or is there not in ideas something that is not in the senses or the sensible? It has made of empiricism a critique of innateness, of the *a priori*. But empiricism has always harbored other secrets. And it is they that David Hume pushes the furthest and fully illuminates in his extremely difficult and subtle work. Hume's position is therefore quite peculiar. His empiricism is a sort of science-fiction universe *avant la lettre*. As in science fiction, one has the impression of a fictive, foreign world, seen by other creatures, but also the presentiment that this world is already ours, and those creatures, ourselves. A parallel conversion of science or theory follows: theory becomes an *inquiry*

(the origin of this conception is in Francis Bacon; Immanuel Kant will recall it while transforming and rationalising it when he conceives of theory as a court or tribunal). Science or theory is an inquiry, which is to say, a practice: a practice of the seemingly fictive world that empiricism describes; a study of the conditions of legitimacy of practices in this empirical world that is in fact our own. The result is a great conversion of theory to practice. The manuals of the history of philosophy misunderstand what they call "associationism" when they see it as a theory in the ordinary sense of the term and as an inverted rationalism. Hume raises unexpected questions that seem nevertheless familiar: To establish possession of an abandoned city, does a javelin thrown against the door suffice, or must the door be touched by a finger? To what extent can we be owners of the seas? Why is the ground more important than the surface in a juridical system, whereas in painting, the paint is more important than the canvas? It is only then that the problem of the association of ideas discovers its meaning. What is called the theory of association finds its direction and its truth in a casuistry of relations, a practice of law, of politics, of economics, that completely changes the nature of philosophical reflection.

The Nature of Relations

Hume's originality – or one of Hume's originalities – comes from the force with which he asserts that *relations are external to their terms.* We can understand such a thesis only in contrast to the entire endeavor of philosophy as rationalism and its attempt to reduce the paradox of relations: either by finding a way of making relations internal to their own terms or by finding a deeper and more comprehensive term to which the relation would itself be internal. "Peter is smaller than Paul": How can we make of this relation something internal to Peter, or to Paul, or to their concept, or to the whole they form, or to the Idea in which they participate? How can we overcome the irreducible exteriority of relations? Empiricism had always fought for the exteriority of relations. But in a certain way, its position on this remained obscured by the problem of the origin of knowledge or of ideas, according to which everything finds its origin in the sensible and in the operations of the mind upon the sensible.

Hume effects an inversion that would take empiricism to a higher power: if ideas contain nothing other and nothing more than what is contained in sensory impressions, it is precisely because relations are external and heterogeneous to their terms – impressions

or ideas. Thus the difference isn't between ideas *and* impressions but between two sorts of impressions or ideas: impressions or ideas of terms *and* impressions or ideas of relations. The real empiricist world is thereby laid out for the first time to the fullest: it is a world of exteriority, a world in which thought itself exists in a fundamental relationship with the Outside, a world in which terms are veritable atoms and relations veritable external passages; a world in which the conjunction "and" dethrones the interiority of the verb "is"; a harlequin world of multicolored patterns and non-totalizable fragments where communication takes place through external relations. Hume's thought is built up in a double way: through the *atomism* that shows how ideas or sensory impressions refer to punctual minima producing time and space; and through the *associationism* that shows how relations are established between these terms, always external to them, and dependent on other principles. On the one hand, a physics of the mind; on the other, a logic of relations. It is thus Hume who first breaks with the constraining form of predicative judgment and makes possible an autonomous logic of relations, discovering a conjunctive world of atoms and relations, later developed by Bertrand Russell and modern logic, for relations are the conjunctions themselves.

Human Nature

What is a relation? It is what makes us pass from a given impression or idea to the idea of something that is not presently given. For example, I think of something "similar"... When I see a picture of Peter, I think of Peter, who isn't there. One would look in vain in the given term for the reason for this passage. The relation is itself the effect of so-called principles of association, contiguity, resemblance, and causality, all of which constitute, precisely, a *human nature*. Human nature means that what is universal or constant in the human mind is never one idea or another as a term but only the ways of passing from one particular idea to another. Hume, in this sense, will devote himself to a concerted destruction of the three great terminal ideas of metaphysics: the Self, the World, and God. And yet at first Hume's thesis seems disappointing: what is the advantage of explaining relations by principles of human nature, which are principles of association that seem just another way of designating relations? But this disappointment derives from a misunderstanding of the problem, for the problem is not of causes but of the way relations function as effects of those causes and the practical conditions of this functioning.

Let us consider in this regard a very special relation:

causality. It is special because it doesn't simply go from a given term to the idea of something that isn't presently given. Causality requires that I go from something that is given to me to the idea of something that has never been given to me, that isn't even giveable in experience. For example, based on some signs in a book, I believe that Caesar lived. When I see the sun rise, I say that it will rise tomorrow; having seen water boil at 100 degrees, I say that it necessarily boils at 100 degrees. Yet expressions such as "tomorrow," "always," "necessarily," convey something that cannot be given in experience: tomorrow isn't given without becoming today, without ceasing to be tomorrow, and all experience is experience of a contigent particular. In other words, causality is a relation according to which I go beyond the given; I say more than what is given or giveable – in short, *I infer and I believe*, I expect that... This, Hume's first displacement, is crucial, for it puts belief at the basis and the origin of knowledge. The functioning of causal relations can then be explained as follows: as similar cases are observed (all the times I have seen that *a* follows or accompanies *b*), they fuse in the imagination, while remaining distinct and separate from each other in our understanding. This property of fusion in the imagination constitutes habit (I expect...), at the

same time as distinction in the understanding tailors belief to the calculus of observed cases (probability as calculus of degrees of belief). The principle of habit as fusion of similar cases in the imagination and the principle of experience as observation of distinct cases in the understanding thus combine to produce both the relation and the inference that follows from the relation (belief), through which causality functions.

Fiction

Fiction and Nature are arranged in a particular way in the empiricist world. Left to itself, the mind has the capacity to move from one idea to another, but it does so at random, in a delirium that runs throughout the universe, creating fire dragons, winged horses, and monstrous giants. The principles of human nature, on the other hand, impose constant rules on this delirium: laws of passage, of transition, of inference, which are in accordance with Nature itself. But then a strange battle takes place, for if it is true that the principles of association shape the mind, by imposing on it a nature that disciplines the delirium or the fictions of the imagination, conversely, the imagination uses these same principles to make its fictions or its fantasies acceptable and to give them a warrant they wouldn't

have on their own. In this sense, it belongs to fiction to feign these relations, to induce fictive ones, and to make us believe in our follies. We see this not only in the gift fantasy has of doubling any present relation with other relations that don't exist in a given case. But especially in the case of causality, fantasy forges fictive causal chains, illegitimate rules, simulacra of belief, either by conflating the accidental and the essential or by using the properties of language (going beyond experience) to substitute for the repetition of similar cases actually observed a simple verbal repetition that only simulates its effect. It is thus that the liar believes in his lies by dint of repeating them; education, superstition, eloquence, and poetry also work in this way. One no longer goes beyond experience in a scientific way that will be confirmed by Nature itself and by a corresponding calculus; one goes beyond it in all the directions of a delirium that forms a counter-Nature, allowing for the fusion of anything at all. Fantasy uses the principles of association to turn them around, giving them an illegitimate extension. Hume thereby effects a second great displacement in philosophy, which consists in substituting for the traditional concept of error a concept of delirium or illusion, according to which there are beliefs that are not false but illegitimate — illegitimate exercises

of faculties, illegitimate functioning of relations. In this as well, Kant owes something essential to Hume: we are not threatened by error, rather and much worse, we bathe in delirium.

But this would still be nothing as long as the fictions of fantasy turn the principles of human nature against themselves in conditions that can always be corrected, as, for example, in the case of causality, where a strict calculus of probabilities can denounce delirious extrapolations or feigned relations. But the illusion is considerably worse when it belongs to human nature, in other words, when the illegitimate exercise or belief is incorrigible, inseparable from legitimate beliefs, and indispensable to their organization. In this case, the fanciful usage of the principles of human nature itself becomes a principle. Fiction and delirium shift over to the side of human nature. That is what Hume will show in his most subtle, most difficult, analyses concerning the Self, the World, and God: how the positing of the existence of distinct and continuous bodies, how the positing of an identity of the self, requires the intervention of all sorts of fictive uses of relations, and in particular of causality, in conditions where no fiction can be corrected but where each instead plunges us into other fictions, which all form part of human nature. In a posthumous work

that is perhaps his masterpiece, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume goes on to apply the same critical method not simply to revealed religions but also to so-called natural religion and to the teleological arguments on which it is based. Here, Hume is at his most humorous: beliefs, he says, all the more form part of our nature as they are completely illegitimate from the point of view of the principles of human nature. It is no doubt in this way that we should understand the complex notion of *modern skepticism* developed by Hume. Unlike ancient skepticism, which was based on the variety of sensible appearances and errors of sense, modern skepticism is based on the status of relations and their exteriority. The first act of modern skepticism consisted in making belief the basis of knowledge—in other words, in naturalizing belief (positivism). The second act consisted in denouncing illegitimate beliefs as those which don't obey the rules that are in fact productive of knowledge (probabilism, calculus of probabilities). But in a final refinement, or third act, illegitimate beliefs in the Self, the World, and God appear as the horizon of all possible legitimate beliefs, or as the lowest degree of belief. For if everything is belief, including knowledge, everything is a question of degree of belief, even the delirium of non-knowledge. Humor, the

modern skeptical virtue of Hume, against irony, the ancient dogmatic virtue of Plato and Socrates.

The Imagination

If the inquiry into knowledge has skepticism as its principle and its outcome, if it leads to an inextricable mix of fiction and human nature, it is perhaps because it is only one part of the inquiry, and not even the main one. The principles of association in fact acquire their sense only in relation to passions: not only do affective circumstances guide the associations of ideas, but the relations themselves are given a meaning, a direction, an irreversibility, an exclusivity as a result of the passions. In short, what constitutes human nature, what gives the mind a nature or a constancy, is not only the principles of association from which relations derive but also the principles of passion from which "inclinations" follow. Two things must be kept in mind in this regard: that the passions don't shape the mind or give it a nature in the same way as do the principles of association; and that, on the other hand, the source of the mind as delirium or fiction doesn't react to the passions in the same way as it does to relations.

We have seen how the principles of association, and especially causality, required the mind to go be-

yond the given, inspiring in it beliefs or extrapolations not all of which were illegitimate. But the passions have the effect of restricting the range of the mind, fixating it on privileged ideas and objects, for the basis of passion is not egotism but *partiality*, which is much worse. We are passionate in the first place about our parents, about those who are close to us and are like us (restricted causality, contiguity, resemblance). This is worse than being governed by egotism, for our egotisms would only have to be curtailed for society to become possible. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the famous theories of contract posed the problem of society in such terms: a limitation, or even a renunciation, of natural rights, from which a contractual society might be born. But we should not see Hume's saying that man is by nature partial rather than egotistical as a simple nuance; rather, we should see it as a radical change in the practical way the problem of society is posed. The problem is no longer how to limit egotisms and the corresponding natural rights but how to go beyond partialities, how to pass from a "limited sympathy" to an "extended generosity," how to stretch passions and give them an extension they don't have on their own. Society is thus seen no longer as a system of legal and contractual limitations but as an institutional inven-

tion: how can we *invent artifices*, how can we create institutions that force passions to go beyond their partialities and form moral, judicial, political sentiments (for example, the feeling of justice)? There follows the opposition Hume sets up between contract and convention or artifice. Hume is probably the first to have broken with the limiting model of contract and law that dominated the sociology of the eighteenth century and to oppose to it a positive model of artifice and institution. Thus the entire question of man is displaced in turn: it is no longer, as with knowledge, a matter of the complex relation between fiction and human nature; it is, rather, a matter of the relation between human nature and artifice (man as inventive species).

The Passions

We have seen that with knowledge the principles of human nature instituted rules of extension or extrapolation that fantasy in turn used to make acceptable simulacra of belief, such that a calculus was always necessary to correct, to select the legitimate from the illegitimate. With passion, on the other hand, the problem is posed differently: how can we invent an artificial extension that goes beyond the partiality of human nature? Here fantasy or fiction takes on a new

meaning. As Hume says, the mind and its fantasies behave with respect to passions not in the manner of a wind instrument but in the manner of a percussive instrument, "where, after each beat, the vibrations still retain some sound which gradually and imperceptibly dies." In short, it is up to the imagination to reflect passion, to make it resonate and go beyond the limits of its natural partiality and presentness. Hume shows how aesthetic and moral sentiments are formed in this way: the passions reflected in the imagination become themselves imaginary. In reflecting the passions, the imagination liberates them, stretching them out infinitely and projecting them beyond their natural limits. Yet on at least one count, we must correct the metaphor of percussion: as they resonate in the imagination, the passions do not simply become gradually less vivid and less present; they also change their color or sound, as when the sadness of a passion represented in a tragedy turns into the pleasure of an almost infinite play of the imagination; they assume a new nature and are accompanied by a new kind of belief. Thus the will "moves easily in all directions and produces an image of itself, even in places where it is not fixed."

This is what makes up the world of artifice or of culture: this resonance, this reflexion of the passions

in the imagination, which makes of culture at once the most frivolous and the most serious thing. But how can we avoid two deficiencies in these cultural formations? On the one hand, how to avoid the enlarged passions being less vivid than the present ones, even if they have a different nature, and, on the other, how to avoid their becoming completely undetermined, projecting their weakened images in all directions independently of any rule. The first problem is resolved through agencies of social power sanctions or the techniques of rewards and punishments, which confer on the enlarged sentiments or reflected passions an added degree of vividness or belief: principally government, but also more subterranean and implicit agencies, like custom and taste. In this regard, too, Hume is the first to have posed the problem of power and government in terms not of representativity but of credibility.

The second point is also relevant to the way in which Hume's philosophy forms a general system. If the passions are reflected in the imagination or in fantasy, it is not an imagination that is naked but one that has already been fixed or naturalized by the principles of association. Resemblance, contiguity, causality — in short, all the relations that are the object of a knowledge or a calculus, that provide general rules for the

determination of reflected sentiments beyond the immediate and restricted way in which they are used by non-reflected passions. Thus aesthetic sentiments find in the principles of association veritable rules of taste. Hume also shows in detail how, by being reflected in the imagination, the passion of possession discovers in the principles of association the means to determine the general rules that constitute the factors of property or the world of law. A whole study of the variations of relations, a whole calculus of relations, is involved, which allows one to respond in each case to the question: Does there exist, between a given person and a given object, a relation of a nature such as to have us believe (or our imagination believe) in an appropriation of one by the other. "A man who has chased a hare to the point of exhaustion would consider it an injustice if another person pushed ahead of him and seized his prey. But the same man who goes to pick an apple that hangs within his reach has no reason to complain if another man, quicker than he, reaches beyond him and takes it for himself. What is the reason for this difference if not the fact that immobility, which is not natural to the hare, is closely related to the hunter, whereas this relation is lacking in the other case?" Does the throw of a javelin against a door ensure the ownership of an abandoned city, or

must a finger touch the door in order to establish a sufficient relation? Why, according to civil law, does the ground win out over the surface, but paint over the canvas, whereas paper wins out over writing? The principles of association find their true sense in a casuistry of relations that works out the details of the worlds of culture and of law. And this is the true object of Hume's philosophy: relations as the means of an activity and a practice — juridical, economic and political.

A Popular and Scientific Philosophy

Hume was a particularly precocious philosopher: at around twenty-five years old, he wrote his important book *A Treatise of Human Nature* (published in 1739–1740). A new tone in philosophy, an extraordinary firmness and simplicity emerge from a great complexity of arguments, which bring into play the exercise of fictions, the science of human nature, and the practice of artifice. A philosophy at once popular and scientific — a sort of pop philosophy, which for its ideal had a decisive clarity, a clarity not of ideas but of relations and operations. It was this clarity that Hume would try to impose in his subsequent works, even if this meant sacrificing some of the complexity and the more difficult aspects of the *Treatise: Essays, Moral*

and Political (1741–1742), *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and *Political Discourses* (1752). He then turned to *The History of England* (1754–1762). The admirable, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* rediscovers once again that great complexity and clarity. It is perhaps the only case of real dialogues in philosophy; there are not two characters, but three, who play many parts, forming temporary alliances, breaking them, becoming reconciled, and so on: Demea, the upholder of revealed religion; Cleanthes, the representative of natural religion; and Philo, the skeptic. Hume-Philo's humor is not simply a way of bringing everyone to agreement in the name of a skepticism that distributes "degrees" but also a way of breaking with the dominant trends of the eighteenth century and of anticipating a philosophy of the future.

CHAPTER THREE

Nietzsche

The Life

The first book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with the story of three metamorphoses: "How the spirit becomes camel, the camel becomes lion, and how finally the lion becomes child." The camel is the animal who carries: he carries the weight of established values, the burdens of education, morality, and culture. He carries them into the desert, where he turns into a lion; the lion destroys statues, tramples burdens, and leads the critique of all established values. Finally, the lion must become child, that is, he who represents play and a new beginning – creator of new values and new principles of evaluation.

According to Nietzsche, these three metamorphoses designate, among other things, the different moments of his work, as well as the stages of his life and health. These divisions are no doubt arbitrary: the lion is pre-