

# The Dramatic Nature of Our Selves: David Hume and the Theatre Metaphor

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## Introduction

I should like to begin this essay of mine on man by some fables and plays, since man is himself a fable and a play.<sup>1</sup>

The following article is on man.<sup>2</sup> It is about the notion of the self or personal identity as one finds it in David Hume's philosophy. The fable I want to talk about is Hume's fictional account of the self; the play is the theatrical performance of the Humean self on the stage of the world.<sup>3</sup>

David Hume initially established his reputation as the debunker of certain myths, namely man's speculative beliefs. Of his account of personal identity it has been said: "Hume's discussion of personal identity is the best there is; no one can feel the same about the problem after reading it as he did before; and like so much that Hume says, it is incisive, penetrating, and most unsatisfying."<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the self according to Hume calls for debate. Famously, in Book I of his *Treatise* Hume argues for the fictional character of the idea of the self and declares it to be a "bundle or collection of different perceptions" (*T*, p. 252). Then, in Book II, he recasts the idea of the self as

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Luis Vives, 'A Fable About Man', trans. Nancy Lenkeith, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. Ernst Cassirer, Paul O. Kristeller and John H. Randall, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article the author will use gendered rather than non-gendered language, only to retain a harmonious flow of text with that of Hume.

<sup>3</sup> References to Hume's works will be made parenthetically in the text as follows: (T) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1978); (A) 'An Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature', in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); (PM) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1957); (E) *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, revised edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985); (L) *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Terence Penelhum, *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 23.

something “always intimately present with us” (*T*, p. 317). Scholars are divided among those who charge Hume with contradiction and those who read his apparent change of mind of Book II within his overall project of a science of human nature. Yet, traditional readings have generally disregarded the artistic side of the philosophical contention. In this article I submit the idea that there is an aesthetic story to be told about the Humean self. I make the claim that the well-known metaphor of the mind as a “kind of theatre” as stated in Book I of the *Treatise* is not incidental. It is the missing link between the problematic theoretical self of Book I and the transparent self of relations of Book II. The metaphor of the theatre is not incidental for another reason. It will be argued that the self in Hume has an aesthetic nature which is first and foremost theatrical. The article will end by questioning the validity of theatricality as a model for the self and conclude by suggesting a dramatic notion of substance.

### **What is Theatricality?**

Simply put, theatricality, as it will be used here, will refer to a specific mode of presentation and a specific mode of perception: the mode of presentation of the self to the social and the mode of perception of the self through the social. Theatricality is a way of looking at the law of supply and demand in the intricate world of human minds, “mirrors to one another” on the secular stage of self-presentation. An invitation to *watch* the show of humanity on the stage of life, a philosophical discourse on the theatricality of the self owes the classic metaphor of the theatre of the world (*theatrum mundi*), yet is also open to benefit from new voices on the theatrical. “What characterizes the use of the concept of theatricality in different discourses today,” Anne-Britt Gran says, “is that theatricality is viewed in a relational and procedural manner, rather than in a manner that is substantial and essential.”<sup>5</sup> A philosophical discourse on the theatricality of the self will not share metaphysical concerns on “*substances*, and *substantial forms*, and *accidents*, and *occult qualities*” (*T*, p. 219). It will regard human nature as exhibited in the space of spectacle.

By the time Hume enters the philosophical scene, the stage metaphor is a common literary device of moral critique. As E. G. Hundert explains, the figure of the *theatrum mundi* served literature and philosophy “as a compelling device for the representation and response to grave spiritual uncertainties about the constitution of a stable, authentic and thus morally responsible self.”<sup>6</sup> Freed from the gaze of the director above (fate, providence, or God), the metaphor

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<sup>5</sup> Anne-Britt Gran, ‘The Fall of Theatricality in the Age of Modernity’, *SubStance*, vol. 31, no. 2/3, Issue 98/99 (2002), p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 143.

pursues none of the metaphysical and religious aims it used to have. It speaks of the world *as if* a stage for the similarity between the conventions of the theatre and the dynamics of social life: Whereas in the past, the metaphor had voiced a melancholic meditation on the ephemeral character of one's performance on the stage of the world, in the eighteenth century it recounts a bitter-sweet analogy between the histrionic behaviour of actors on stage and man's behaviour in everyday life. Watching the show of the world, there is what Addison called the "Fraternity of Spectators," a community composed of "every one that considers the World as a Theatre, and desires to form a right Judgment of those who are actors in it."<sup>7</sup> The gaze of the other is the self's greatest need and greatest fear.

Hume's use of the metaphor certainly responds to the Enlightenment tradition of *theatrum mundi*. Yet, it goes well beyond it. The theatricality of the self in Hume is more than a metaphor: is a way of understanding human nature in the space opened up by the presence of the other. It is my aim to show that the stage metaphor in Hume becomes a window into the theatrical nature of the self.

### ***The Mind is a Kind of Theatre...***

"There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity" (*T*, p. 251). Experience, Hume claims, is sufficient to rebut the metaphysicians. As stated in Book I, Hume's first principle has it that "all our simple ideas proceed either mediately or immediately from their correspondent impressions" (*T*, p. 7). Hume looks for the "constant and invariable" impression that should correspond to the idea of the self, finds none, and concludes that the only way I can "catch" my own self is through some perception or other, leaving it for the perplexed reader to prove otherwise. Hence, his famous claim on the self as a "bundle" of perceptions: "I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (*T*, p. 253).

The theatre of the mind is the image Hume finds best suited to represent our being "in a perpetual flux and movement." "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations." Hume

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 4 vols. eds. Gregory Smith (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1946), No. 10.

is not through with his image yet, that he warns us about the limits of the metaphor: “The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is compos’d” (*T*, p. 253). The caveat is not self-defeating. Hume is not saying that the metaphor is flawed as a model for thinking the self, in general. He is saying that, at this point in the narrative, the language of the stage is not likely to describe the self: not until the bridge between the barren image of the “bundle of perceptions” of metaphysics and the self of common life has been crossed.

It is my claim that Hume’s metaphor of the mind as a “kind of theatre” creates that bridge. The metaphor is what offers reasons for the continuity of the two selves of the *Treatise*: the problematic self of Book I (the self we have no idea about), and the transparent self of Book II (the self whose idea is ever present to us). The search for a substance might have shown inconclusive; the search for a self has not come to a close yet. To his credit, Hume has been rather unequivocal about the two levels of discourse on the self, claiming that “we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves” (*T*, p. 253). The nature of the self “as it regards our passions” cannot be captured by the language of metaphysics and this is the reason why the relational self is the great absent at the *incipit* of the narrative. As long as the self is conceived as metaphysicians do, or, as Hume puts it, in terms of “personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination,” the stage of the mind remains a figure of speech. All we can get here is a succession, between imaginary wings, of perceptions to which we promptly assign a “name” (*soul* or *substance* or *self*) so that we are spared the “absurdity” of distinct and fleeting perceptions. It is in our nature, Hume explains, to “feign” identity to “disguise” diversity. We respond to the identity with regard to our thought or imagination with the attitude of a skilled actor, who knows how to feign and disguise. Rather than having to face contradictions, we are willing to embrace a fiction; actually, not just *a* fiction, but *our* fiction, product of our own imagination. The narrative of the self in Hume starts off as a fable.<sup>8</sup> But this is just its beginning. We are a few pages away in the *Treatise* from leaving the fiction of the self behind.

*Still...*

Things are not so simple. Before leaving the fiction of the self behind, a

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<sup>8</sup> On the notion of fable in Hume’s philosophy, see John J. Richetti, *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983).

distinction is claimed between two kinds of personal identity. We read it. Yet, the opening of Book II rarely fails to catch the reader off guard with its new, out of the plot character: the self, as “that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness” (*T*, p. 277). Ingenious *deus ex machina* on Hume’s part, as one might say, the self of Book II is still a “succession of related impressions and ideas.” So how would it be in any way different from the fiction of Book I? The difference lies in its qualifier: it is a succession of impressions and ideas “of which we have intimate memory and consciousness.” In Book II we no longer reason about the self: we encounter the self through the passions. The self of Book II is a self that comes on the scene under new garments: no longer as a theoretical, but as a *dramatic* self. And a dramatic self needs stage directions, not a definition. The search for a definition of the self is left behind to the disputes of metaphysicians.

All this said, and even granting the practical turn in the narrative, a sense of contradiction may be hard to banish. What is it so difficult to swallow about the new self? Book I has just ended. We have learned about the lack of *the* impression of the self and the comfortable fiction we construct thereof. All of a sudden and almost in passing, the Hume of Book II tells us that our self is “intimately present to us” (*T*, p. 427). Actually, it is “the idea, or rather impression of ourselves” that is “always intimately present with us” (*T*, p. 317). Besides, we are made aware that the self has, more than any other object, “durable” existence (*T*, p. 293). How does Hume account for his radical change of mind? Hume cannot account for it, some scholars claim. The second self, they say, is a different self and there is no continuity among the self of imagination and the self of passions.<sup>9</sup> I claim that a continuity (or the lack of) between the two selves depends on whether or not we follow the narrative of the self in the *Treatise*. It is precisely to support that continuity between the two selves that the theatrical model can be called upon. In the book *of the passions* the metaphor of the theatre ends being a metaphor and becomes a window into the theatrical nature of the self. Let us follow the narrative. Pride is the first passion we encounter. And the passion of pride is exactly what gives

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<sup>9</sup> For discussions for and against the continuity of the two selves in Hume see, for example: (contra) Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Eugenio Lecaldano, ‘The Passions, Character, and the Self in Hume’, *Hume Studies*, vol. 28 (2002), pp. 175-194; Pauline Chazan, ‘Pride, Virtue, and Self-Hood: A Reconstruction of Hume’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1992), pp. 45-64; Jane McIntyre, ‘Personal Identity and the Passions’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 27 (1989), pp. 545-557; Robert S. Henderson, ‘David Hume on Personal Identity and the Indirect Passions’, *Hume Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1990), pp. 33-44.

us access to “the idea, or rather impression of ourselves.”

*What has pride to do with the self?*

The way I read it, the “only manner in which we can conceive” the new self of Book II of the *Treatise* parallels the “only manner in which we can conceive” the passions of pride and humility (*T*, p. 306). By an “original and natural instinct” (*T*, p. 286), pride and humility have the self as their object: “When self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for pride or humility” (*T*, p. 277). Without self, there would be no pride or humility. Nor would there be sympathy: “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (*T*, p. 316). But, as experience tells us, pride and humility are part of our world, and, in Hume’s typical fashion, there is no need to add more words to explain what these passions are. We know them. As for sympathy, this is such a basic quality of human nature that Hume does not hesitate to call it a “natural” quality. Hence: the self.

At this point, we need to ask: what is “the only manner in which we can conceive” pride and humility? Book II opens with Hume’s “description” of the mechanisms of “attraction” among impressions and ideas, accounting for the arising of a passion. The way he puts it may be, at first glance, quite baffling: “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” (*T*, p. 289). As it is, this is Hume’s statement of the principle of the “double relation of ideas and impressions” (*T*, p. 286). In light of this principle, the impression of pleasure arising from the “quality” of the cause, gives “impulse,” by resemblance, to a similar impression of pleasure; simultaneously, the idea conveyed by the “subject” of the cause gives “impulse,” by association, to the idea of the self. The result is the convergence of the impression of pleasure and the idea of the self. The mechanism of attraction among ideas and impressions may be now re-stated as: When an idea (in Hume’s example, a beautiful house) produces – in terms of “quality” (its beauty) – an impression (pleasure) related to an impression (pride), which is connected with an idea (the self), related to the first idea (the beautiful house) – in terms of its “subject” (the house) – these two impressions must be in a manner inseparable, nor will the one in any case be unattended with the other. A parallel attraction is needed otherwise there would be no reason for the impression of pleasure to be connected with the impression of pride. The

“system” is thus defined: “[A]ll agreeable objects, related to ourselves, by an association of ideas and of impressions, produce pride, and disagreeable ones, humility” (*T*, p. 290).

The system, in its “irresistible evidence,” carries noteworthy consequences when it comes to the idea of the self (*T*, p. 286). Or is it an impression? “’Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that ’tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it” (*T*, p. 317). We need to answer two related questions: (1) what is this new impression that, despite the claims of Book I, now we seem indubitably and intimately to have? And (2) how does the above “system” of impressions and ideas provide a privileged access to *the* impression of our selves?

Question two takes us to the causes of pride and humility. Hume speaks of two kinds of causes: “primary” ones, such as vice and virtue, beauty and deformity, and external objects specifically related to me, and “secondary” ones, such as the opinions of others. I can be proud of my body, my possessions, my actions, my qualities, my opinions, and of any other thing related to my self, e.g. my country, my friends, or my relatives: “Whatever other objects may be comprehended by the mind, they are always consider’d with a view to ourselves; otherwise they wou’d never be able either to excite these passions, or produce the smallest increase or diminution of them” (*T*, p. 277). The self which according to Hume can be said to be either a soul or a body – “which-ever you please to call it” (*T*, p. 276) – extends beyond my mind and my body toward the whole of my practical environment as long as it is contiguous and specific to me: “The passions looking farther, comprehend whatever objects are in the least ally’d or related to us. Our country, family, children, relations, riches, houses, gardens, horses, dogs, cloaths; any of these may become a cause either of pride or of humility” (*T*, p. 279). Thus, going back to the first question – what this new impression of self may be – the system of double attraction, and the simultaneous constitution of pride and self, unveils relational aspects to the impression of self which can only be discerned and distinguished in practice.<sup>10</sup> The new impression of self has moved a long

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<sup>10</sup> Why should the simultaneity in the constitution of pride and self matter? It matters because acknowledging simultaneity means the recognition of pride as primordial passion. The self is a self already extended to the ‘mine’. The simultaneity in the constitution of pride and the self tells of the theatricality of the self. On the temporal relation between the self and the passion of pride, see Amelie O. Rorty, “‘Pride Produces the Idea of Self’: Hume on Moral Agency”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68, No. 3 (1990), pp. 255-269; McIntyre, ‘Personal Identity and the Passions’; Pauline Chazan, ‘Pride, Virtue, and Self-

way down the road from that *one*, identical and simple impression we were not able to find in Book I. Multiple causes of pride means multiple sides of the self, as it happens that the perception of my beautiful house touches myself as the one to which it belongs or that the success of someone I know touches myself as her friend.

### *Hume's Empirical Self*

When William James vindicates the “imperishable glory of Hume,” he speaks of Hume’s self made into an “empirical, verifiable thing.”<sup>11</sup> “The Empirical Self of each of us,” James explains, “is all that he is tempted to call by the name of *me*. But it is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw... Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked.”<sup>12</sup> The self which takes pride in the roles it plays and which extends to and is comprised of its relations, is an “empirical thing.” It is a self I can “catch” in what it *does*, in the relations it *has*, not define for what it *is*. In this sense, the empirical self is also a “verifiable thing.” The self is verifiable because it is a performing and performed self. The parts the self plays are the “social selves” it presents or represents to the other. In Hume’s words, the self without a ‘whom’ or a ‘what’ to relate to is “in reality nothing”: “Ourselves, independent of the perception of every other object, is in reality nothing: For which reason, we must turn our view to external objects; and ’tis natural for us to consider with most attention such as lie contiguous to us, or resemble us” (*T*, p. 340).

The presentation of the self to the social, the first moment of theatricality, is not self-sufficient, though. It needs the second moment of theatricality, the perception of the self through the social. The self of roles can go so far in the lack of recognition from its audience: “We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy’d apart from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable” (*T*, p. 363).<sup>13</sup> The natural “propensity” that can account for the social character of the

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Hood: A Reconstruction of Hume’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1992), pp. 45-64.

<sup>11</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1904), p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 291.

<sup>13</sup> Compare with James’ social self: “*A man’s Social Self* is the recognition which he gets from his mates. ... No more fiendish punishment could be devised ... than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof.” James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 291.

Humean self is sympathy: “Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, avarice, curiosity; revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor wou’d they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others” (*T*, p. 363). And sympathy is based upon the mirror quality of minds: “In general we may remark, that the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other’s emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees” (*T*, p. 365). We carry images of the other as well as have our own images carried by others. The minds of men create a web of passions, sentiments, and opinions, as if they had “rays.” James’ idea of man’s social selves is already intimated in Hume: “Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind.”<sup>14</sup>

It should be emphasized that Hume’s hall of mirrors magnifies the mutual relation between presentation and recognition. The performing self is a self in need of recognition, and recognition can be bestowed (or denied) to any role which is mirrored out.<sup>15</sup> Basic as it is, the theatrical instinct of the self, its instinctual role-taking, has to get the “applause” of the other: “There are a few persons, that are satisfy’d with their own character, or genius, or fortune, who are not desirous of showing themselves to the world, and of acquiring the love and approbation of mankind” (*T*, p. 331). Like the actor, the self comes to be in its performances and acts of deference to the public, and the spectacle of humanity teaches the self of the images which are more likely to attain its audience’s approval. Man has an *aesthetic* nature which is first and foremost theatrical.

The self is theatrical because of its origins as a self of relations. It is theatrical because its identity is the result of a process of role-taking. It is theatrical because of the way it gets to know itself and the other, in terms of actor and audience, of images of the self, of sympathetic responses. The self is theatrical because of its constitutive relation with the primordial passion of pride.<sup>16</sup> It is theatrical in its need of recognition and audience. It is theatrical in its mimetic bent and behaviour. It is theatrical because man’s happiness is to be

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<sup>14</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 294.

<sup>15</sup> See Rorty, “‘Pride Produces the Idea of Self’: Hume on Moral Agency”, p. 261.

<sup>16</sup> As far as the temporal relation between the self and the passion of pride goes, it is worth noting the parallel with Hume’s theory of causation, especially at *T*, p. 94.

found in action and novelty.<sup>17</sup> The self is theatrical, finally, because its refinement toward character can be captured in terms of a “spectator theory of morality.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Is the Theatrical Model of the Self Adequate?**

The question phrases a reasonable suspicion toward a theatrical account of personal identity. Can a concept like theatricality account for the reality of the self of relations? If passions are taken in and then expressed with the only purpose of making an impression on one’s audience, there is no sincerity left in the performances of the theatrical self. The show of human life might be all “for nothing,” a convenient play put together in a “dream of passions.”<sup>19</sup> If all the self does is to take on a role, use it as long as it needs it, and dispense with it immediately afterwards; if the self lives the lives of its roles the way actors do, its life is a borrowed life, played for the applause from the audience. There can be no attachment to one role above the other. It may be that the Humean self ends up being “a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.”<sup>20</sup> It may be that all we have reached so far is a “bundle” of roles instead of a “bundle” of perceptions. We might have been better off with the theatre without a stage of Book I of the *Treatise*. Now, there is a stage and there is a show going on, and one still wonders whether there is any substance beyond the multiple appearances of the self.

Of course, one might simply suggest that, after all, nothing has significantly changed in the panorama of the Humean self and this is all there is to it. Back in Book I of the *Treatise*, the stage metaphor famously failed to represent the self as a bundle of perceptions: “The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos’d” (*T*, p. 253). Now the story repeats itself and the stage metaphor fails to represent the relational

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<sup>17</sup> Capaldi calls the Humean man a role-player, for his “desire for action, for liveliness, for novelty,” i.e. for the three components of happiness, according to Hume. Nicholas Capaldi, ‘Hume as a Social Scientist’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 32 (1978), p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> The expression “spectator theory” of morality is in Brown: “By a ‘spectator theory’, I mean a theory that takes the central moral concepts to be those used by spectators in the assessment of character traits and motives—the concepts of praise and blame, approbation and condemnation, respect and contempt.” Charlotte Brown, ‘From Spectator to Agent: Hume’s Theory of Obligation’, *Hume Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1994), pp. 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 355

<sup>20</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 253.

self as well. We have the presentations of self, but we lack the notion of the “place” where those are played.

The self needs an audience observing and judging its performances. Disillusioned in its access to reality, with its dismantled fictions, it might be argued that the self remains one of them. The skilled actor of Book II has succeeded in replacing the successive perceptions of Book I and has now become a fictional character on its own, a *poetic* self. As imagination gives us images of what is not really there, but that we need to see, from the existence of external objects to the self, the actor-self reflects its own images to the world in hope of gaining “a character, a name, a reputation” (*PM*, p. 96). It may be that human nature is just a play of appearance and reflections. However, by building up its character and reputation, the self has finally acquired the “title to a name” that in Book I was just a metaphysical fiction. Is this the ending point of our fable? Should we take Hume seriously when he says: “My only crime has been too little dissimulation” (*L*, 1, pp. 87 and 47)?

*Dramatic Substance: A Reply to the Objection*

Be that as it might, why would one even lament the absence of a substance beyond the appearances of the self, after so much work has been put to get rid of the metaphysical ghost? What should we make of this whole journey from the language of metaphysics to the language of the stage if, in the end, we did feel a metaphysical lack? As a matter of fact, the worry that justifies a suspicion toward the theatrical self is of another kind. It is not a metaphysical worry about the real beyond the appearances. Rather, it is an aesthetic worry about the reality of appearances themselves and it is this one I will address in what follows.

An insightful way of looking at the dynamics between appearance and reality in the public space of spectacle comes from the epistemological debate: specifically, from Hume’s take on the modern idea of “secondary and sensible qualities” (*T*, p. 230). According to the Hume of Book I of the *Treatise*, the modern distinction between primary and secondary qualities notoriously fails. Hume follows the reasoning of modern philosophy up to its “annihilating” (but “easy”) consequences. If primary qualities – such as “extension and solidity,” “figure, motion, gravity, and cohesion” – were the “only *real* ones” (*T*, p. 227), we would “utterly annihilate all these objects, and reduce ourselves to the opinions of the most extravagant skepticism.” In fact, “[i]f colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possess’d of a real, continu’d, and independent existence; not even motion, extension and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on” (*T*, p. 228). Take out secondary qualities and we are denied what can give us the idea of a body.

The epistemological debate is one suited for a discussion upon man's first and second nature. If there was an invariable ("real") first nature to man and its multiple appearances were just floating perceptions, we would "annihilate" human nature and end up once more with "the opinions of the most extravagant scepticism." Hume was familiar with the "variety" of human manners not to take them into account in his science of human nature. Life, he writes in his *Letters*, is composed of a "Variety of Scenes" that makes it into a spectacle comparable to the happenings of the theatre. On his "voyage" in 1748, Hume says: "We have really made a very pleasant Journey or rather Voyage, with good Weather, sitting at our Ease, & having a Variety of Scenes continually presented to us, & immediatly shifted, as it were in an Opera" (*L*, 1, p. 125). Humanity itself is a "spectacle" which admits of "prodigious changes": "Those, who consider the periods and revolutions of human kind, as represented in history, are entertained with a spectacle full of pleasure and variety, and see, with surprize, the manners, customs, and opinions of the same species susceptible of such prodigious changes in different periods of time" (*E*, p. 97). What has been previously said about primary and secondary qualities (take out secondary qualities and we are denied what can give us the idea of a body) can be rephrased here for the commerce of manners: take out appearances, the becoming of man, and no substance is there to be found.

Hume has a dramatic notion of substance. *Dramatic substance* is a stability the self does not own, but gains. It is a substantiality instantiated in a specific space and a specific time, as if the unfolding of a drama. Its space is the relational space of spectacle, where the agent is *ipso facto* an actor, under the gaze of spectators. Its time is the beginning, middle, and end of dramatic poetry. In the tense-less time of metaphysicians, Hume could not find identity and thus spoke of the verbal fiction of personal identity. Now, in the tensed time of the passions, there is no need to feign continuity for the self.<sup>21</sup> The self's continuity is the result (*poiesis*) of a well-ordered dramatic unfolding. In Hume, appearance, the becoming of man, is aesthetic in a way similar to the way in which Schiller in his *Letters* will talk about aesthetic appearance: "Only insofar as it is *candid* (expressly renouncing all claim to reality), and only insofar as it is *self-dependent* (dispensing with all assistance from reality), is appearance aesthetic."<sup>22</sup> Schiller's idea of aesthetic appearance is already intimated in Hume and makes his theatrical search for a substance of character

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<sup>21</sup> For a distinction between the tense-less time of Book I and the tensed time of Book II, see Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 112.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1954), p. 128.

different from the metaphysical search for the real beyond the appearances. Again, the epistemological debate is occasion for comparison.

In Book I of the *Treatise*, the term fiction surfaces almost at every turn of page and makes one think of Hume's philosophy as a philosophy of fiction. With Hume, we enter and live within an "always fictional reality."<sup>23</sup> We inhabit a universe of fictions. We create fictions, or better we inherit and learn them from the world of custom, and through language we communicate and pass them on.<sup>24</sup> There is the belief/fiction of external object, the belief/fiction of personal identity, and the belief/fiction of causality and of the principle that the future will resemble the past. Those beliefs of ours are product of the imagination and the imagination becomes our way to reality. When Hume belittles the metaphysical effort to reach *the* reality beyond appearances, he recognizes the "world-making character of the principles of the imagination."<sup>25</sup> "When we see," Hume says announcing his experimental method for the science of human nature, "that we have arriv'd at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented; tho' we be perfectly satisfy'd in the main of our ignorance, and perceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refin'd principles, beside our experience of their reality" (*T*, p. xxii). Humean fictions oppose the reality of rationalism; but, more than a claim about reality, they are a claim about the manner in which we do believe what we believe. In the speculative fictions of Book I one can already appreciate the 'self-dependent' character of appearance. In the struggle between reason and the imagination, the imagination becomes our way to 'reality' and constitutes its fictions as those intelligible wholes that help us making sense of experience. In an analogous manner, dramatic substance is not a tense-less *I-do-not-know-what* beyond the reach of our knowledge. It is a new intelligible whole that helps us making sense of experience, in the world of common life and conversation.

## Conclusion

"Man is himself a fable and a play," says Vives. Man can be either a fable or a play according to the perspective we choose, says Hume. The search for a substantiality of self remains problematic unless we abandon the theoretical pretensions of metaphysicians and reach for man's universe of passions, in the common life of action and conversation. Substantiality of self is gained back in

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<sup>23</sup> Leo Damrosch, *Fictions of Reality in the Age of Hume and Johnson* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1989), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Our universe of fictions is the world of the "deep linguistic conventions" of common life, as Livingston puts it in his *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, p. 17.

new dramatic garments. In its everyday presentations on the stage of the world, the self does exhibit its dramatic substance by showing order, coherence, and proportion in behaviour. The “wonderful instinct in our souls,” which reason is, does *see* personal identity or dramatic substance because it sees and recognizes patterns in the world of custom. The once elusive impression of self has acquired a narrative and, now, we can finally “catch” it. In Book I, the search for a stage, for a self as the place of performance for the coming and going perceptions, had to remain inconclusive. In fact, the search had to go the other way around and discover in our perceptions in the public space of spectacle (passions) the place of performance for a self which is a theatrical self. The self in terms of passions, far from being a dispute of words, is finally something we can meaningfully talk about. Our new horizon of discourse is no longer the private stage of the mind, but the public space of spectacle.