

Hume on the Psychology of Public Persuasion

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Abstract: Political figures engage rhetoric and exalted speech to excite the imagination, stir up the emotions, and prompt their listeners to embrace and act on an ideological perspective. However, there is more to excellent public oratory than eloquence. Rational persuasion is also a key component, emphasizing facts, evidence, and reasoning. Hume acknowledges that rational persuasion alone is not terribly effective in the public arena. His corpus contains many references to eloquence. Dispassionate delivery of evidence does not have the psychological impact of eloquent delivery. What explains the difference? My aim in this paper is to use Hume's theory of belief and "the feeling of conviction" to explain his analysis of effective oratory. Furthermore, I point to the abuses of eloquence in the political arena. Given these abuses, I ask why Hume considers eloquence a virtue. Although eloquence is immediately agreeable to us (one category of virtue for Hume), it can have detrimental, even deadly, consequences. Does this make it vicious in certain cases, since it has disutility, and given that usefulness to the public is another category of virtue for Hume? I suggest that skilled and elegant oratory is pleasing, but such oratory, when used for inhumane ends, could undermine the pleasure of the oratory experience itself.

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Skilled public oratory is crucial to waging successful political movements. Political figures engage rhetoric and exalted speech to excite the imagination, stir up the emotions, and prompt their listeners to embrace and act on an ideological perspective. Hume's corpus contains many references to eloquence. He lists it among the virtues in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. In the *Treatise*, he analyzes its role in influencing the passions and belief. He refers to eloquence as a trait of several historical characters discussed in his *History of England*. And he wonders, in his essay "Of Eloquence," why Modern orators, with their advanced experience and education, lack the level of eloquence and rhetorical accomplishment the Ancients possessed.

There is more to excellent public oratory, however, than eloquence. Rational persuasion is also a key component, and it requires emphasizing facts and evidence, allowing listeners to follow the orator's reasoning and draw the same conclusions for themselves. Hume acknowledges that rational persuasion alone is not terribly effective in the public arena, though. The aim of an orator is to produce shared belief and

action, but dispassionate delivery of evidence and drawing of logical connections does not have the psychological impact of eloquent delivery. Perhaps all of this seems obvious. However, what explains the difference in effects? My aim in this paper is to use Hume's theory of belief formation to explain his analysis of effective oratory. Furthermore, I point to the abuses of eloquence in the political arena. Given these abuses, I ask why Hume considers eloquence a virtue. Although eloquence is immediately agreeable to us (one category of virtue for Hume), it can have detrimental, even deadly, consequences. Does this make it vicious in certain cases, since it has disutility, and given that usefulness to the public is another category of virtue for Hume?

So, in outline: I begin, in section 1, with a discussion of Hume's analysis of belief, which is essentially an idea felt with a certain sentiment. In section 2, I discuss the ways in which persons acquire beliefs on Hume's view, including through experience, education, conditioning, and sympathy, many of which involve association of ideas and passions. Potent rhetoric appeals to both reason and feeling, which I illustrate in section 2. In section 3, I briefly discuss how political persuasion can enlist the Humean principle of sympathy to spread belief. Section 4 treats the effect of rhetoric on action, via its ability to intensify both passion and belief. Finally, in section 5, I raise some questions about the status of eloquence, a key component of fine oratory, as a virtue in Hume's philosophy.

1. BELIEF: CONTENT AND THE FEELING OF CONVICTION

Hume first offers his characterization of belief and its acquisition in Book 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and discusses belief again in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748).¹ Beliefs are ideas, mental representations of the world, and can be accurate or inaccurate, true or false. However, an important feature of belief distinguishes it from the mere having or entertaining of an idea: it has a forceful and lively feeling that unbelieved ideas lack. Hume's definition of belief in the *Treatise* is as ". . . A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" . . . (T 1.3.7.5). There he writes that "The idea of an object is an essential part of the belief of it, but not the whole. We conceive many things, which we do not believe . . ." (T 1.3.7.1). Since what an unbelieved idea and what a believed idea represent can be the same, the only way a belief can be distinguished from an idea merely imagined is by a phenomenal dimension. On Hume's account, my imagining that the Allies lost World War II and my believing that they did are not different in content; they differ in the way in which the two ideas are present to the mind. Beliefs have a vivacity that imaginings lack.

In his official account of beliefs in matters of fact, Hume describes belief acquisition as a result of our making causal connections between experiences or impressions of objects. (This is his analysis of how we originally adopt beliefs based on our experience of nature, which is not the only source of belief. See below). On this causal account, finding two types of impressions happening consistently in proximity, we form an expectation of the second object upon the experience of the first. The relation to a present impression is integral to belief because beliefs are triggered by experiences or impressions after we have acquired the habit of associating the relevant impressions. In one of Hume's examples, a person who walks to the edge of a deep river stops; without reflection or further experience, she suspects the consequences of stepping into the water. "The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory" (T 1.3.8.13). The current impressions trigger the belief that walking into deep water blocks air, since the belief itself is the product of causal associations already well ingrained. When Hume defines a belief as a lively idea associated with a present impression, he indicates that, even though experiential beliefs depend on prior conditioning, they can come to mind spontaneously in response to current experience (See Radcliffe 2018, pp. 70-71).

Hume recognizes that we often acquire beliefs by education and based on the testimony of others, which also involves conditioning. Beliefs are impressed upon us by parents, teachers, ministers, politicians, and others in positions of authority. Children learn through verbal reinforcement such as preaching, lecturing, discussion, and repetition. This mode of belief acquisition involves conditioning and habituation as well but is fostered by the (typically) purposeful behavior of others, as in the case in moral education (T

3.2.2.26). This way of acquiring belief is especially relevant to the discussion of rhetoric. We are very susceptible to the views of others, which Hume sees as a weakness, writing “No weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call CREDULITY, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others.” We “have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation” (T 1.3.9.12). Moreover, others’ beliefs can become our own through sympathy. I say more about these matters in the next section.

The question of what it is to have a belief in Hume’s theory is complicated by two factors. One is that Hume, in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, expresses doubts about the account he has given there. The other is that he may offer a somewhat different description of belief in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* when compared to the *Treatise*. These apparent shifts of view have led some commentators (Sandis 2012, pp. 206-8; Stroud 1977, pp. 161-62) to treat Humean belief as a sentiment or feeling. The evidence in favor of regarding Humean belief in this way comes from the *Treatise* Appendix discussion. There Hume writes, “Either the belief is some new idea, such as that of reality or existence, which we join to the simple conception of an object, or it is merely a peculiar feeling or sentiment” (T Appendix 2). He eliminates the former possibility, as he earlier did in the text, and then concludes,

that belief consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment; in something, that depends not on the will, but must arise from certain determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters. When we are convinc’d of any matter of fact, we do nothing but conceive it, along with a certain feeling, different from what attends the mere *reveries* of the imagination. And when we express our incredulity concerning any fact, we mean, that the arguments for the fact produce not that feeling” (T Appendix 2).

Hume, however, clarifies his characterization of belief, indicating that believing an idea is a modification of “the manner” in which ideas are conceived (T Appendix 4-7), rather than a sentiment added to the ideas. When we use causal reasoning to arrive at a belief in a matter of fact, “however those ideas may be vary’d to the feeling, there is nothing ever enters into our *conclusions* but idea” (T Appendix 4). The ideas’ “customary connexion with the present impression, varies them and modifies them in a certain manner, but produces no act of the mind, distinct from this peculiarity of conception” (T Appendix 4). Belief, in the *Treatise*, then, is an idea experienced with a phenomenal dimension that other ideas lack. This means that it is a cognition and not a feeling by itself.

Turning to the *Enquiry*, nine years after the *Treatise*, Hume’s treatment of belief may indicate a shift from seeing it as a dimension of forcefulness, vivacity, or liveliness that characterizes belief in the *Treatise* (see Bell 2002, pp. 182-85). In the first *Enquiry*, Hume says, “Were we to attempt a *definition* of this sentiment, we should, perhaps, find it a very difficult, if not an impossible task” (EHU 5.12). Yet, he suggests, we are all familiar with the feeling, and are at every moment conscious of the sentiment represented by “belief.” Hume thinks we can attempt a description, writing, “belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain” (5.12). We just need to agree that, whatever the feeling of belief is, it is “that act of the mind, which renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination” (5.12). My suggestion is that we should call this sentiment attached to a believed idea the feeling of conviction. Even if belief is not captured in terms of increased force and vivacity—as Hume characterized the difference between impressions, memories, imagination, believed ideas and unbelieved ideas in the *Treatise*—still a belief is a conception or idea with a sentimental dimension. How eloquent speech can function to produce an idea imbued with a feeling of conviction is the topic of the next two sections.

2. PRODUCING THE FEELING OF CONVICTION BY REASON AND BY PASSIONATE APPEAL

Hume's essay "Of Eloquence" was first published in 1742, between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. A close reading of Hume's essay reveals two features of oratory achievement: the ability to arouse passion and a proficiency at organized argumentation. The former is clear from Hume's affirmation, "Interest and ambition, honour and shame, friendship and enmity, gratitude and revenge, are the prime movers in all public transactions" (EI 1).² Effective public speech must appeal to these passions to produce political action. Hume implies, however, that successful speech is not simply an aesthetically pleasing choice of words designed to deliver an emotional appeal to listeners. To be an excellent orator, one must also be proficient at argumentation and debate. When discussing the traits essential to good public speaking, Hume writes, "A public speaker must know beforehand the question under debate. He may compose all the arguments, objections, and answers, such as he thinks will be most proper for his discourse. If any thing new occur, he may supply it from his invention; nor will the difference be very apparent between his elaborate and his extemporary compositions" (EI 20). And in his inquiry into why Modern orators are not as accomplished as the Ancients, he asks whether inflaming the passions is at odds with good sense, which the Moderns, influenced by humanism and reason, claim to possess in a much greater degree than the Ancients. Hume suggests that men of good sense can also be affected by appeal to the passions:

Does any man pretend to have more good sense than JULIUS CÆSAR? yet that haughty conqueror, we know, was so subdued by the charms of CICERO's eloquence, that he was, in a manner, constrained to change his settled purpose and resolution, and to absolve a criminal, whom, before that orator pleaded, he was determined to condemn (EI 14).

Appeals to reason and appeals to passion are not only compatible, but necessary, to good oratory. Hume's theory offers a psychological explanation for the contributions of each to eliciting conviction.

Hume argues that the human mind naturally associates ideas, passing from the thought of one object "to what is resembling, contiguous to, or produc'd by it" (T 2.1.4.2). These principles of association play a large role in his account of the passions as well. For instance, when Hume discusses pride and humility, he notes that any quality of the mind or body can be their subject and "[t]he 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 2.1.2.5). Impressions (which includes sensations and passions) are subject to the same movement of the mind: "All resembling impressions are connected together, and no sooner one arises than the rest immediately follow. Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be compleated" (T 2.1.4.3). Joy turns to love, generosity, pity, courage, pride, and so on (T 2.1.4.3). Furthermore, these two kinds of association "assist and forward" one another so that when they are related to the same object, the mental transition from idea to idea and impression to impression happens very easily:

Thus a man, who, by any injury from another, is very much discompos'd and ruffled in his temper, is apt to find a hundred subjects of discontent, impatience, fear, and other uneasy passions; especially if he can discover these subjects in or near the person, who was the cause of his first passion. Those principles, which forward the transition of ideas, here concur with those, which operate on the passions; and both uniting in one action, bestow on the mind a double impulse. The new passion, therefore, must arise with so much greater violence, and the transition to it must be render'd so much more easy and natural (T 2.1.4.4).

The new passion that arises in this case is a kind of hatred toward the person who perpetrated the injury. It arises with an intensity of feeling provoked by the many associations of a variety of unpleasant passions with this individual's behavior.

The principles of association are instrumental to the efficacy of rhetoric in producing belief, as the case of Cicero's speech concerning Cataline illustrates. Cicero, esteemed by Hume as one of the most accomplished orators in history, speaks of the crimes of Cataline, whom he accuses of plotting to undermine the Roman Senate. He offers the following picture, in question form, to the Senate:

all your plans are as clear as daylight to us. . . . Do you remember that I said in the Senate on the 21st of October that Gaius Manlius, your tool and lackey in your wild scheme, would take up arms on a certain day and that the day would be the 27th of October? Was I not right, Catiline, both in the seriousness of the plot, beyond belief in its ferocity though it was, and—a much more remarkable feat—in the date? I also said in the Senate that you had postponed the massacre of leading citizens until the 28th of October even though by that date many of the leading figures in the State had left Rome. . . . You cannot deny, can you, that, on that very day after the others had departed, my guards and my elaborate precautions had hemmed you in and you could not move against the Republic? And that you said that you were quite content with the slaughter of those of us who had remained behind? . . .

. . . I say that on the night before last you came to the street of the scythe-maker. . . . There you were joined by many of your accomplices in your criminal folly. You do not have the effrontery to deny it, do you? (Cicero 39, 41).

Cicero's offering testimony of Cataline's alleged activities impresses upon the Roman senators' ideas of Cataline and crimes against the government. However, the mere hearing of the charges is not necessarily convincing. Acquisition of belief requires association of an idea with a present impression that elevates the sentimental aspect of the idea. If the senators have a past association of criminal deeds with Cataline, the speech provides the present impressions that boost the idea of Cataline as a criminal to the status of belief. Rational appeal in oratory evokes in listeners' minds ideas that they associate habitually in certain ways based on shared past experiences. So, if Cicero's accusations evoke in the mind of the members of the Senate associations of Cataline with other similar behaviors, the vivacity (to use the *Treatise* account) of the idea that Cataline engaged in a treacherous plot can rise to the level of belief.

However, for those who do not have established associations of Cataline with crime, the ability of the speaker to use repetition and lofty speech to create associations and to arouse passions that become in the listeners' minds connected to Cataline is crucial. The use of terms like "lackey" and "slaughter" provokes images that arouse resentment, horror, and disgust, which infuse the idea of Cataline as vicious with a feeling of conviction. These passions become associated with him in such a way that an intense hatred results and is associated with a desire for his misfortune.

Hume also recognizes that the feelings of surprise, amazement, or astonishment can fortify associated ideas with the vivacious feeling requisite to belief:

Admiration and surprize have the same effect as the other passions; and accordingly we may observe, that among the vulgar, quacks and projectors meet with a more easy faith upon account of their magnificent pretensions, than if they kept themselves within the bounds of moderation. The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens the idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience (T 1.3.10.4).

For instance, a 19th-century snake oil salesman peddling immediate cures for smallpox, plague, scarlet fever, and the like, can make converts in a crowd provoked by astonishing claims made on behalf of the medi-

cines for sale. When persons have not experienced the purported causes of an effect, they can still adopt beliefs about those effects, due, not to constant conjunction, but due to associations of a powerful emotion, like amazement, with an idea. The idea is elevated by the association to the level of belief. So, for instance, one may come to believe in a miracle due to the force of passions like wonder. Such ideas attain the force and vivacity, or conviction, of belief. A skilled orator can use this phenomenon by making unorthodox claims that evoke surprise about their subjects and imbue the associated complex ideas with a vivacity that constitutes the feeling of conviction. This phenomenon is demonstrated by unsubstantiated and provocative claims made by former U.S. President Donald Trump in support of the view that he won the Presidential election in 2020. Trump's appeals worked on like-minded people who experienced heightened anger by the claims without investigating the grounds for them and who were later incited by their forceful feelings to perpetrate violence at the U.S. Capitol Building in January 2021.

3. THE ROLE OF SYMPATHY

Political speech is aimed at creating both unity and faction: unity of purpose against opponents or enemies. Thus, another Humean principle instrumental to the effectiveness of oratory is sympathy. Belief is often transmitted from one person to another with similar dispositions by sympathy, our ability to turn the ideas of another's state of mind into impressions of our own. Hume writes (in the context of his discussion of pride):

Now nothing is more natural than for us to embrace the opinions of others. . . ; both from *sympathy*, which renders all their sentiments intimately present to us; and from *reasoning*, which makes us regard their judgment, as a kind of argument for what they affirm. These two principles of authority and sympathy influence almost all our opinions . . . (T 2.1.11.9).

Later Hume qualifies the extent to which sympathy influences our beliefs:

So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree. And tho', on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiments, and way of thinking; yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought, and give an authority to that opinion. . . . (T 3.3.2.2).

Hume's points are applicable to the effect of fine oratory, which attempts to convert collections of people to the same viewpoint as that of the speaker and unites them in a cause or a purpose. The words and passions of the speaker can sometimes arouse similar sentiments in the listeners via their sympathies in such a way that an idea is vivified enough to belief for some. As Hume notes, the reasoning that supports a position is also important to the efficacy of the persuasion, and at times, listeners may not undergo a change in sentiments far enough to inculcate a new belief. However, they cannot help but be affected to some degree by the standpoints of others and are prompted to take them into account.

To take a contemporary example, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during WWII, was renowned for not only his rhetoric, but also for his ability to create a sense of comradery and sympathetic bonding. His use of "we" in his speeches, identifying with the people to whom he spoke, broke down barriers between himself and common people and between persons, making sympathetic identification easier. In his famous "Finest Hour" speech to the House of Commons amidst the atrocities of the War, he announced:

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands; but

if we fail then the whole world, including the United States, and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more prolonged, by the lights of a perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years men will still say, “this was their finest hour” (Churchill, June 18, 1940).

A speaker with the ability to communicate like-minded sentiment and a feeling of unity among the public appeals to the sympathetic aspect of human nature, which Hume recognizes as stronger than environmental commonalities. He writes, “To this principle we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and ‘tis much more probable, that this resemblance arises from sympathy, than from any influence of the soil and climate....” (T 2.1.11.2). Of course, it is important that Churchill had the force of reason behind him, which is frequently missing from certain attempts to proselytize in the political arena.

4. BELIEF TO ACTION

Potent oration might inculcate belief and arouse passions, but unless these mental states are causally stronger than competing ones, they will not produce action. Hume writes, “We may of ourselves acknowledge, that such an object is valuable, and such another odious; but ‘till an orator excites the imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections” (T 2.3.6.7). Our affirmations of the value of an object, a public regulation, a way of life, and so on, may not influence our actions, or perhaps even our affections, Hume says, if not infused with force by the excitement of a magnificent speaker. Since the goal of oratory is not only to arouse passions and infuse belief, but also to prompt action, it is important to understand how Hume sees action as an outcome of passion and belief. In this context, I intend to emphasize the role that strength of conviction plays in the process. Commentators often discuss the forcefulness of passions necessary to action, but beliefs are also held with varying degrees of conviction. The degree to which we are convinced of a situation makes a decisive difference to whether we act on the belief.

Indeed, some commentators (for instance, Kail 2007; Cohon 2008) suggest that some beliefs produce actions without passions (in Hume’s view). I am not interested in that issue here. Scholars generally agree that passions, on Hume’s theory, provide an impetus to action, even if some beliefs without passions also do. So, all are generally agreed that motivation derives from belief and passion, whether in conjunction or separately. The point that I am interested in making here is that both the strength of a passion and the strength of belief (what I call “strength” or “degree” of conviction) are crucial in determining whether the relevant passion and belief will result in action. Rhetorical speech and passionate oratory can increase the strength of both belief and passion and be an effective tool in instigating collective action.

I briefly consider passion first. Hume recognizes a distinction between the strength of a passion and its violence, although he also alleges that there is a correlation between the two. A violent passion is felt with internal upheaval, while a calm one is felt in a gentler way, without inner turmoil (T 2.3.3.8-9). Any passion can be felt calmly or violently, but some, like aesthetic pleasure, are typically calm, while others, like anger, are typically violent. Calmness and violence are phenomenal dimensions. On the other hand, the strength of a passion is the causal force the passion exerts on the person who possesses it (T 2.3.4.1). Since we each experience diverse passions at the same time toward different objects and people, and many of these passions are of a nature to prompt action, we would never act if all were of the same strength. The causal force or strength of a passion is a comparative feature, where the causally strongest passion or combination of passions cause action, other things being equal. Calm passions are frequently the strongest because when acting on a certain passion becomes habitual, it becomes calmed (“a settled principle of action”),

and we don't feel the motive behind habitual actions (T 2.3.4.1), as for instance, when stinginess becomes one's character trait and is expressed routinely. On my interpretation, the distinction between violence and strength allows Hume to account for the fact that we often want something badly, but we don't act for it. "Wanting badly" refers to the phenomenal dimension of the passion, while what we do is caused by the passion with a greater causal force.

When orators whip up the emotions of an audience, they are, in Hume's terms, increasing the violence of a passion. This does not necessarily mean that these violent passions will result in action, but Hume suggests that generally the violent passions have a "more powerful influence on the will" than calm ones (although calm passions can control them at times when affirmed by a strong resolution) (T 2.3.8.13). Nonetheless, he suggests that "when we wou'd govern a man, and push him to any action, 'twill commonly be better policy to work upon the violent than the calm passions" (T 2.3.4.1). Politicians have learned this lesson, so they inflame the sentiments of their audience with potent images and ideas to produce heightened emotions and sentiments that eventually result in collective action on the part of the listeners.

I now want to consider the effects on action of strength of conviction, which fine oration can influence by arousing the imagination. Hume writes,

a vigorous and strong imagination is of all talents the most proper to procure belief and authority. 'Tis difficult for us to withhold our assent from what is painted out to us in all the colours of eloquence; and the vivacity produc'd by the fancy is in many cases greater than that which arises from custom and experience. We are hurry'd away by the lively imagination of our author or companion; and even he himself is often a victim to his own fire and genius (T 1.3.10.8).

Strength of conviction is decisive to action when the agent has competing desires of equal force or one desire with more than one possible means. A General in war torn between two ways of possibly defeating the enemy will surely opt for the route that is likely to be most successful based on knowledge of tactics, terrain, transportation, and so on. Hume's discussion of probability, which follows his discussion of the influence of belief, constitutes a commentary on strength of belief in action. He identifies degrees of evidence and corresponding conviction: knowledge is the result of comparison of ideas (knowledge of necessary truths); proof is causal reasoning that is free of doubt (resulting in beliefs like the sun will rise tomorrow or that all people will die); and probability is evidence "attended with uncertainty" (T 1.3.11.2).

Probability is especially relevant to this discussion, since political oration usually proceeds by attempting to boost the degree of conviction we have about issues of great uncertainty. Hume divides probability into that which is founded on chance and that which arises from consideration of causes (T 1.3.11, T 1.3.12). I do not discuss chance here, but in the case of causal probability, strength of belief is affected in various ways that correlate with the way in which beliefs are acquired—that is, by a constant conjunction of experiences and the mind's relation of the idea of one of those experiences to a present impression of the other. Hume notices, therefore, that probability is affected by a contrariety of events, which interrupts the constancy of the conjunction. "A contrariety of events in the past may give us a kind of hesitating belief for the future after two . . . ways" (T 1.3.12.6). One way lies in producing an "imperfect" habit, which makes the transition to belief less forceful and steady (1.3.12.6). The other lies in our considering the contrary events and weighing the experiments on each side (1.3.12.7).

We reason from an interrupted regularity by drawing "together the divided images presented by experience" to entertain an idea about a single future event. When a greater number of images concur on one side than on the other:

These agreeing images unite together, and render the idea more strong and lively, not only than a mere fiction of the imagination, but also than any idea, which is supported by a lesser number of experiments. Each new experiment is as a new stroke of the pencil, which bestows an additional vivacity on the colours without either multiplying or enlarging the figure (T 1.3.12.11).

Public oration can reinforce experiments on one side or the other by the speaker's attempts to present new evidence that adds to the accumulation of cases. Animal rights activists cite numerous instances of cruelty and maltreatment of cattle, chickens, and pigs in the food industry to convince listeners that the practices of factory farming are immoral. At the same time, these advocates point to the slim evidence of the need for meat-eating to human nutrition and emphasize the effects on the environment of raising animals for meat. In so doing, the imaged ideas supplied by powerful speech are gathering strength in favor of a conclusion portrayed with deep conviction.

"Unphilosophical probability," a third sort of probability that Hume says is not recognized by philosophers, is crucial to a discussion of strength of conviction, since it has to do with psychological factors that affect the forcefulness of our beliefs (T 1.3.13). These considerations are less quantifiable than those in philosophical probability and are not recognized as normatively legitimate, but they have a dramatic effect on the strength of our convictions. First, when the memory of the resemblance between the past conjoined experiences is diminished by the passage of time, the evidence is diminished in our minds and the degree of belief accordingly: "The argument, which we found on any matter of fact we remember, is more or less convincing according as the fact is recent or remote . . . [T]his circumstance . . . secretly changes the authority of the same argument, according to the different times, in which it is propos'd to us" (T 1.3.13.1). Second, in a similar vein, Hume writes that "our degrees of belief and assurance" are influenced by how recent an experiment relevant to a particular belief took place; we are more forcefully affected by the recent evidence than by an experiment whose results have been obscured by time (T 1.3.13.2). Third, "when an inference is drawn immediately from an object, without any intermediate cause or effect, the conviction is much stronger, and the persuasion more lively, than when the imagination is carry'd thro' a long chain of connected arguments" (T 1.3.13.3). Hume explains this last point by the fact that the vivacity of the original impression upon which a current belief depends decays in proportion to the distance along which the impression must transfer its force. Finally, a fourth source of unphilosophical probability is the use of general rules. Some general rules are formed by the mind's seeing as connected what are accidental circumstances, and so these result in prejudices and rationally unfounded generalizations, such as "An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity . . ." (T 1.3.13.7). At the same time, the "second effect" of the mind's general rules is to "take a review of this act of the mind, and compare it with the more general and authentic operations of the understanding." Then "we find it to be of an irregular nature, and destructive of all the most establish'd principles of reasoning; which is the cause of our rejecting it" (T 1.3.13.12). Hume adds that this second-order effect of general rules does not prevail in all persons; it depends on characters and dispositions. Prejudices do exercise an influence on many persons' convictions.

Orators can exploit Hume's analysis of unphilosophical probability and the effects of proximity on belief by using simple, short lines of reasoning, by providing reminders of past events to elevate the intensity of those ideas and bring them back into public consciousness, and by appealing at times to prejudicial generalizations that resonate with certain types of listeners. The stronger the degree of conviction, the more likely the audience is to act on these heightened states of belief.

5. ELOQUENCE IN HUME'S VIRTUE ETHICS: A PROBLEM?

For Hume, certain traits are meritorious because they are immediately agreeable to the self or to others, while other traits are meritorious because they are useful to the self or to others. Hume discusses these issues in both the *Treatise* and the second *Enquiry*. Traits immediately agreeable to the self include cheerfulness, tranquility, and benevolence (the last of which is also useful to others) (EPM 7).³ Features immediately agreeable to others include good manners, wit, ingenuity, and eloquence (EPM 8). Discretion, industry, and frugality are among those useful to the self (EPM 6), while generosity, bravery, and concern for others ("humanity") are some of the traits useful to others (EPM 5).

Pertinent to our topic, he writes, "Eloquence, genius of all kinds, even good sense, and sound reasoning, when it rises to an eminent degree, and is employed upon subjects of any considerable dignity and nice

discernment; all these endowments seem immediately agreeable, and have a merit distinct from their usefulness” (EPM 8.7). While good sense and sound reasoning “employed upon subjects of nice discernment” may be immediately agreeable and so virtues under any circumstances, the same does not seem true of eloquence and genius. (I take it that the reference to the “subjects” of dignity and discernment modifies only “sound reasoning,” since Hume uses the singular in his qualification, “when it rises to an eminent degree”). In the former cases, the worthy ends for which the sense and reasoning are used are incorporated into the descriptions, as designated by the modifiers: “good” sense and “sound” reasoning “employed upon subjects of nice discernment.” In the cases of eloquence and all sort of genius, ends are not invoked, and the immediate agreeableness comes from the pleasing effects on observers or on the self of the eloquent speech and displays of genius. However, when intelligence or eloquence is used to promote painful and destructive conditions, what are we to say about its moral quality? We might admire the speaking abilities of a Hitler or the genius of an Elizabeth Holmes (who in her early 30’s became a multi-billionaire by duping investors and the biotech industry into believing she had invented a revolutionary way to analyze blood). Do we want to say that the articulate expressions of a murderer and the intelligence of a conniver are virtues? Hume’s view implies that they are.

In the Introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume writes, “There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy . . . Amidst all this bustle ‘tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colours” (T 0.2).

Eloquence can be an instrument of proselytizing for outrageous views. For instance, Adolph Hitler put into practice what he wrote in *Mein Kampf* (1925), “I know that men are won over less by the written than by the spoken word, that every great movement on this earth owes its growth to great orators and not to great writers.” He was purported to be an excellent speaker who used powerful rhetoric to win over the people of Germany to support the causes of Nazism and believe in the virtues of his totalitarian regime. However, if rhetoric can be used to promote deleterious and destructive goals, how can it be a virtue?

Richard Dees (1997, pp. 45-46) emphasizes that Hume is attuned to the subtleties and complexities of characters, as illustrated by his sketches in his *History of England*, in which one person, like Charles I, embodies both virtues and vices:

To consider him in the most favourable light, . . .his dignity was free from pride, his humanity from weakness, his bravery from rashness, his temperance from austerity, his frugality from avarice . . . To speak the most harshly of him, we may affirm, that many of his good qualities were attended with some latent frailty, which, though seemingly inconsiderable, was able, when seconded by the extreme malevolence of his fortune, to disappoint them of all their influence . . . (Hume, *History* v. 5, 542).

But a mixed character differs from a mixed assessment of a character trait. Dees also observes that self-interested traits, useful and immediately agreeable to the self, are often not useful and agreeable to others, with pride being a case in point (1997, pp. 51-53). A proper assessment of our merit and our pride in genuine accomplishments may not be problematic, but a demonstration of pride is sometimes simply disagreeable to others. Moreover, it is difficult to do an accurate self-assessment, and Hume himself suggests that it is better for the agent to err on the side of overestimating her merits, which others can find obnoxious (T 3.3.2.7-9). Dees rightly suggests that one of Hume’s solutions to the conflict between self-interested behavior (useful and agreeable to the self) and other-interested behavior (useful and agreeable to others) is solved by appeal to rules, like those of etiquette and justice, which set limits on the expression of self-interest (1997, pp. 52-54).

This solution does not help with the case of eloquence or fine rhetoric, however, since these traits are not just immediately agreeable to the possessor, but to others as well. The conflict is not one generated by a

self-orientation and an other-orientation, but by an apparent agreeableness to all and a disutility in some contexts. Dees suggests that Hume has an ambivalence toward certain traits, like military heroism, for similar reasons as those I have invoked in my discussion of eloquence. Hume writes of such heroism that we admire it, but that it also often the source of misery and chaos: the devastation of provinces and destruction of cities, among other consequences. “But when we fix our view on the person himself, who is the author of all this mischief, there is something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration” (T 3.3.2.15). Likewise of wit and eloquence:

wit and eloquence are valu’d, because they are *immediately agreeable* to others. . . . ‘Tis evident, that the conversation of a man of wit is very satisfactory; as a chearful good-humour’d companion diffuses a joy over the whole company, from a sympathy with his gaiety. These qualities, therefore, being agreeable, they naturally beget love and esteem, and answer to all the characters of virtue (T 3.3.4.8).

Marc Hanvelt argues that Hume’s essay “Of Eloquence” introduces a distinction between “high” and “low” rhetoric, where high rhetoric is composed of three elements: “accurate reasoning, a rhetorical style that appeals to the human compulsion to make judgments and eighteenth-century standards of politeness” (Hanvelt 2010, p. 569). High rhetoric, on Hanvelt’s account, is directed toward the public good, and low rhetoric disrespects individuals’ reasoning and can be divisive. The politeness of high rhetoric, on the other hand, includes a respect for the listener’s reason and judgment. “In Hume’s conception of [high] rhetoric, the orator appeals to these faculties in the audience rather than seeking to overpower them” (Ibid.). This interpretation is a development beyond what Hume says explicitly in the text, but perhaps Hanvelt is right about Hume’s intentions. If so, then Hume is appealing to a conception of proper ends that his discussion of eloquence as a virtue because of its immediate agreeableness does not seem to countenance.

One interpretation of Hume’s approach that makes his view more plausible is to say that fine rhetoric, genius, keenness, and similar traits are admirable in isolation from the ends they are used to promote. Only when they are used in conjunction with other vicious traits do they produce bad consequences, and in such cases, the other traits are the causes of the bad results. This seems a reasonable reading. When Hume writes of our admiration of natural talents in the *Treatise*, he writes,

Before I leave this subject of *natural abilities*, I must observe, that, perhaps, one source of the esteem and affection, which attends them, is deriv’d from the *importance* and *weight*, which they bestow on the person possess’d of them. He becomes of greater consequence in life. His resolutions and actions affect a greater number of his fellow-creatures. Both his friendship and enmity are of moment . . . The histories of kingdoms are more interesting than domestic stories: The histories of great empires more than those of small cities and principalities: And the histories of wars and revolutions more than those of peace and order. We sympathize with the persons that suffer, in all the various sentiments which belong to their fortunes. The mind is occupi’d by the multitude of the objects, and by the strong passions, that display themselves. And this occupation or agitation of the mind is commonly agreeable and amusing. The same theory accounts for the esteem and regard we pay to men of extraordinary parts and abilities.... And where any person can excite these sentiments, he soon acquires our esteem; unless other circumstances of his character render him odious and disagreeable (T 3.3.4.14).

We esteem enormous talent and natural abilities because of the importance they bestow on the person who possesses them: the consequences of their actions, whether good or ill, are momentous. And yet, in the last sentence Hume qualifies his observations by noting that other circumstances of such a character can make the person odious. His point is that extraordinary abilities we admire because of the attention they shine

on a person and her actions, even though the person's character overall may not be venerable due to other features.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Hume's psychology of belief well explains the psychological basis of effective oratory on listeners. Belief is an idea one possesses with conviction, and so involves cognition and feeling. The feeling of conviction can be brought on in various ways that fine rhetoric engages: by appealing to reasoning which consists in associations of ideas by experience; by creating associations between an idea and a passion, thus vivifying the connected idea; by making surprise claims that create excitement associated with the idea; and by invoking sympathy to spread beliefs. Public persuasion can be used to spread true claims or false ones, to create beneficial outcomes or deleterious ones. Hume's view of eloquence, however, classifies it consistently as a virtue, admirable for its intrinsic agreeability and the weight it brings to the agent's affairs and actions. Abuses of this virtue are attributable to other features of the agent's character. Dees suggests that the tensions within Hume's view of virtues as traits useful and agreeable to the self or others capture the complexity of human morality (1997, p. 64).

Perhaps they do, but contemporary public thought with its so-called "cancel culture" does not tend to separate immediately agreeable traits from the character of the possessor and the ends that a person seeks. I want to leave the suggestion that skilled and elegant oratory is pleasing, but such oratory, when used for inhumane ends, could undermine for some people the pleasure of the oratory experience itself. Perhaps Hume's moral theory would better reflect human evaluation of oratory by reference to the public effects it produces, rather than by reference to its immediate agreeableness.⁴

NOTES

- 1 References to Hume's *Treatise* are to "T" followed by Book, Part, section, and paragraph numbers. References to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to "EHU" followed by section and paragraph number.
- 2 References to "Of Eloquence" are abbreviated as "El" followed by paragraph number.
- 3 References to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* are to "EPM," followed by section and paragraph number.
- 4 I am grateful to two referees for this journal, one of whom offered extensive comments that has vastly improved this discussion.

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