

The Behavioral Welfare Economist in Society: Considerations from David Hume

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ABSTRACT

We draw on David Hume’s essays on happiness to extend ideas about welfare, preferences, and the social role of behavioral welfare economists in Mario Rizzo’s and Glen Whitman’s (2020) *Escaping Paternalism*. Through literary dialogue, Hume illustrates that individuals have different perspectives on the good life. These perspectives cannot be resolved by the philosopher or the economist. Hume’s sensibilities dovetail with Rizzo’s and Whitman’s notion of inclusive rationality, which implies an open-ended conception of welfare. Hume’s dialogical treatment of the good life has political implications. We take these implications to be a useful expression of Rizzo’s and Whitman’s “paternalism-resisting framework.” The paper concludes with a discussion of Hume’s vision of the proper role of the philosopher in society. That vision extends Rizzo’s and Whitman’s sense that the behavioral economist ought to view herself as a friendly social advisor in conversation with fellow citizens.

Keywords: Behavioral welfare economics, paternalism, David Hume, inclusive rationality, public deliberation

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Do you come to the philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion? – Yes; we come to a philosopher to be instructed, how we shall chuse our ends, more than the means for attaining these ends: We want to know what desire we shall gratify, what passion we shall comply with, what appetite we shall indulge. . .

I am very sorry then, I have pretended to be a philosopher.

—The Sceptic (Hume, 1994, 161, italics in original)

1 Introduction

In *Escaping Paternalism*, Mario Rizzo and Glen Whitman (Rizzo and Whitman, 2020; hereafter cited as “RW”) criticize behavioral paternalists for relying on a standard of welfare derived from the neoclassical model of rationality. According to that standard, welfare consists in the satisfaction of one’s true preferences, which are conceived as context-independent and representable as a complete and transitive ranking of choice options. There is little empirical evidence, according to Rizzo and Whitman, that individuals have true preferences of that sort (cf. Infante *et al.*, 2016). Behavioral paternalists simply tend to “assume that *there must be a well-defined answer* to what is in someone’s best interests, which we can discern if we just look hard enough” (RW, 400; italics in original). In doing so, they “substitute their own judgments rather than confront the indeterminacy in the data.” (RW, 401).

Against behavioral paternalism Rizzo and Whitman defend a concept of inclusive rationality: “Inclusive rationality means purposeful behavior based on subjective preferences and beliefs, in the presence of both environmental and cognitive constraints” (RW, 26). Their conception of inclusive rationality implies an open-ended conception of welfare under which individuals purposefully pursue their own good as they understand it, in the way they see fit. Welfare need not be conceived as satisfying a set of complete and transitive (i.e., “true”) preferences. Indeed, temporary inconsistency or a certain amount of preference rotation might simply illustrate what Mill called “experiments in living” (2003, 122). Rizzo and Whitman elaborate: “No such thing as “welfare” exists until an individual mind comes into being . . . The human mind determines what is good for itself. It seems incredibly peculiar, at best, to support a standard of the mind’s well-being that may be rejected (indeed, often *is rejected*) by the mind itself” (RW, 406; italics in original).

In response to the conceptual difficulties and moralistic dangers that Rizzo and Whitman perceive to be inherent in the behavioral paternalist project, they outline at the end of their book “a better path forward” (RW, 437). Drawing on

Mill's Harm Principle, they argue that we should abstain from coercion, even if we believe that coercion will improve individuals' happiness. Mill also says, however, that if we believe that some choices or ways of living will make an individual happier, then we have "good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him" (quoted in RW, 437). Following Mill, Rizzo and Whitman argue that behavioral economists should take on the role of friendly advisors, contributors to a body of helpful advice for life improvement. Behavioral economists ought to provide "potentially useful information and perspective" and be "friendly voices offering helpful suggestions for better living" (RW, 438). The behavioral economist should approach her fellow citizens not as one condescending from enlightenment, but as a fellow traveler proffering her ideas about the path towards happiness.

The present essay looks to extend Rizzo and Whitman's ideas about welfare, preferences, and the proper role of the behavioral welfare economist in society through a consideration of the ideas of David Hume. Why Hume? In pioneering what he called the "experimental method of reasoning" in the study of human nature (Hume, 2000a, p. 1), Hume anticipates findings of modern psychology (see Reed and Vitz, 2018) and behavioral economics (Palacios-Huerta, 2003; Sugden, 2005, 2006; Matson, 2021). Hume postulates the mind as operating on the basis of psychological principles of association. Connections between mental states are determined by associations of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect between present ideas and memories of past ideas and impressions. His account of mental processes "commits him to predicting patterns of behaviour, which, if observed, would disconfirm the theory of rational choice" (Sugden, 2005, 115; cf. Grüne-Yanoff and McClennen, 2008, 86–104, 93). Such patterns include framing and asymmetric dominance effects, preference reversals, and endowment effects (Sugden, 2006; Palacios-Huerta, 2003). Thinking along such lines, Sugden (2020) claims that "if behavioral economists were to look for a patron philosopher, Hume would be the obvious candidate."

Beyond the fact that he anticipates findings of behavioral economics, Hume is of interest in the present context because he integrates his psychological insights on human nature into a larger moral project. He integrates his study of the mind into a wider consideration of "men as united in society, and dependent on each other" (Hume, 2000a, p. 407) – a study of political economy. It is in this integration that we see Hume's continuing relevance for contemporary debates in behavioral welfare economics; it is to this integration that we turn for support and extension of key aspects of Rizzo's and Whitman's analysis.

We discuss four points of contact between Hume and Rizzo's and Whitman's ideas. (1) Like Rizzo and Whitman, who state that "the mind's determination of what is good for itself is an ongoing process" (RW, 406), Hume holds welfare to be an open-ended phenomenon. The philosopher or political economist cannot define welfare in a one-size-fits-all fashion; she has no privileged insight into the good. There are, according to Hume, potentially many different

good lives to be lived and good paths to be followed. (2) Given the open-endedness of welfare, Hume turns much of his intellectual energy towards securing a stable political framework in which individuals have the liberty and security to pursue their own welfare as they see fit, and to engage with others through voluntary association to refine their own sense of the good. The political dimension of Hume's treatment of welfare dovetails with Rizzo's and Whitman's call to take up a "paternalism-resisting framework" (RW, 434). (3) Although Hume recognizes that there is a multiplicity of potential good lives, he offers some generalized – albeit cautious – insights on welfare in light of his own reflections on human nature. His reflections support aspects of Rizzo's and Whitman's sensibilities on preference formation which for them is an experiential process of "seeking to better achieve one's subjective goals and values" (RW, 438). Prefiguring ideas later developed by Frank Knight and James Buchanan (Knight, 1922; Buchanan, [1979] 1999), Hume suggests that a chief component of human happiness lies in the refinement of one's preferences through social engagement and the pursuit of virtue: happiness lies in the direction of self-development and discovery. (4) Finally, we argue that Hume exemplifies Rizzo and Whitman's advice to behavioral economists to approach the public as fellow-citizens or equals "offering friendly advice" (RW, 439) rather than as enlightened elites or superiors. Following the practice of intellectual luminaries such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, Hume thought that the philosopher (or the political economist) ought to view herself as a coequal participant in a public conversation, a conversation aimed at mutual personal improvement and cultural reform. Hume's vision of the public role and posture of the philosopher has relevant implications for how we think about the role of contemporary behavioral welfare economists in society.

2 Dialoguing about Happiness

Hume's insights on welfare come forth in his discussions on happiness. Happiness is now sometimes distinguished from well-being.¹ The word "happiness" can be taken to mean a transitory emotional state rather than a life well lived. But happiness for Hume hearkens back to the Greek notion of *eudaimonia*, a conception of human flourishing that corresponds to modern talk of well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2008). A concern for happiness in the eudemonistic sense lies at the heart of Hume's intellectual project. He understands "human flourishing [to be] the proper aim not only of ethical precept but also of descriptive psychology" (Potkay, 2000, p. 12).

¹For a helpful introduction to the modern distinction between happiness and well-being, see Haybron (2011). Throughout this essay we use the terms "happiness," "well-being," "welfare," and "flourishing" interchangeably.

What facilitates human flourishing? In what way of living does happiness consist? Hume's answer is not straightforward. He presents his perspectives on the matter dialectically in a series of four essays, first published in 1742. They are titled: "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic." In a footnote at the beginning of the first of the essays, "The Epicurean," Hume lays out the purpose of the essays:

The intention of this and the three following essays is not so much to explain accurately the sentiments of the ancient sects of philosophy, as to deliver the sentiments of sects, that naturally form themselves in the world, and entertain different ideas of human life and of happiness. I have given each of them the name of the philosophical sect, to which it bears the greatest affinity. (Hume, 1994, p. 139)

The decision to treat the nature of happiness or human flourishing through four monologues – which when read together comprise a kind of dialogue – is significant. The rhetorical form of the essays, which seems to follow the lines of Cicero's *De Finibus* (Heydt, 2007, p. 7), has a didactic purpose.² The multivocal form draws the reader into differing perspectives, making it clear that humans naturally have varying conceptions of the good life. The presence of different and sometimes incommensurable points of view on human flourishing among people suggests that we adopt a "sceptically-tinged eclecticism" (Heydt, 2007, p. 13). We should avoid dogmatically imposing our commitments upon others given that there is no single philosophical school or outlook that can provide us with final, demonstratively certain answers about the good.

The open-endedness of happiness is reinforced by the fact that perspectives from different essays dovetail with aspects of Hume's own thought.³ In some respects we might say that Hume is the ultimate "sceptically-tinged eclectic," not only by virtue of his skepticism (for which he is well-known), but also by his eclecticism. The character in the first of the four essays, the Epicurean, whom Hume dubs "the man of elegance and pleasure" (Hume, 1994, 138, note 1), takes happiness to lie in natural pleasures and the gratification of the senses. It is through the enjoyment of pleasure that we flourish as human beings. The Epicurean says to his interlocuter: "You pretend to make me happy by reason, and by rules of art. You must, then, create me anew by rules of art. For on my original frame and structure does my happiness depend" (Hume, 1994, p. 139). The Epicurean believes happiness to be a function of satisfying natural desire, which reason cannot hope to modify: "When by my will alone I can stop the blood, as it runs with impetuosity along its canals, then may I hope to change the course of my sentiments and passions" (Hume, 1994, p. 140). The course of human happiness is evident in our passions themselves. There is not much

²On the connection between the literary form and purpose of the happiness essays, see also Immerwahr (1989).

³This paragraph draws on Immerwahr (1989, pp. 310–313).

more to be said on the matter: “why do I apply to you, proud and ignorant sages, to shew me the road to happiness? Let me consult my own passions and inclinations. In them must I read the dictates of nature; not in your frivolous discourses” (Hume, 1994, p. 141). Such points of view echo Hume’s own comments throughout his work on the relation between reason and the passions (Hume, 2000a, p. 266) and on the satisfaction of refined pleasures.⁴

The next character of the essays, the Stoic, is dubbed “the man of action and virtue” (Hume, 1994, p. 146). He writes in response to the Epicurean. Happiness for the Stoic is furthered not as we simply satisfy our passions, but as we pursue art and industry, as we cultivate virtue and society. The Stoic conceives of happiness as essentially dynamic, not static. Happiness lies in the pursuit and the constant transformation or development of desires, not simply in the satisfaction of desires themselves (Hume, 1994, p. 149). Hume’s own perspective, which we can distinguish from the perspective of any of the four happiness essays alone, has the most in common with the Stoic (Livingston, 1998, 138; Walker, 2013). We return to the Stoic below. For now, it is useful to note that the conception of happiness as dynamic is significant for Hume’s political economy (e.g., Hume, 1994, 270–271; Rotwein, 2009, xlvii; Matson, 2021). The dynamic element of happiness has implications for contemporary discussions. In the context of behavioral welfare economics, the dynamic conception of happiness points out that welfare might *not* consist in a stable, time-consistent set of preferences, but in the activity of pursuing one’s desires and even transforming them into something new. The main argument in one’s utility function, so to speak, might paradoxically be the redefining of one’s utility function, the discovering and the cultivating of better taste.

The Platonist, dubbed “the man of contemplation and *philosophical* devotion” (Hume, 1994, 155, note 1; italics in original), presents the perspective with which Hume appears to sympathize least. “The Platonist” is the shortest of the four essays. The essay arrives at the point that humans undermine their own well-being when they focus on “sensual pleasure or popular applause”; this is because humans are “made for the contemplation of the Supreme Being, and of his works” (Hume, 1994, p. 156). It is in the contemplation of the divine and the ideal that happiness lies.

The character of the final and most probing essay is the Sceptic. The Sceptic has sometimes been taken to represent Hume’s own position and as undermining the opinions expressed by the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the

⁴For an insightful interpretation of Hume as a qualified kind of Epicurean, see Dorsey (2015). There is much to be said for Dorsey’s interpretation of Hume as accepting a “unique hybrid of hedonism and *perfectionism*: a view that indexes the value of individual pleasures to the extent to which these pleasures conform to, or are fitting of, a particularly sentimentalist conception of human nature” (p. 246; italics in original). Dorsey, however, seems to miss the fact that a significant part of human happiness for Hume lies in its *pursuit*, not strictly in the satisfaction of desires (Potkay, 2000, 69; Rotwein, 2009, xlvii; Matson, 2021).

Platonist (e.g., Fogelin, 1985, 117–119; cf. Immerwahr, 1989). The arguments of the Sceptic are best understood, however, not as totally undermining the positions of the previous essays but as providing a critical framework within which the activity of philosophizing about happiness ought to take place. “The speech of the ‘Sceptic’ is not merely another speech about happiness. It is also and primarily a speech about the limits of philosophical theories of happiness” (Livingston, 1998, p. 98). Whereas the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Platonist consider the question, “what is human happiness?,” the Sceptic, while offering some modest insights about happiness, is primarily concerned with the question, “what can *philosophers* hope to say about human happiness?”

The perspective conveyed by the Sceptic relates to Hume’s dialectical conception of philosophy (Livingston, 1984; Merrill, 2015a, 153–160; cf. Stewart, 1991) and the faculty of reason in particular (Matson, 2017). What is philosophy, and what can the philosopher hope to accomplish? Hume discovers that the philosopher cannot hope to extricate herself from a web of pre-philosophical beliefs, habits, and feelings. These beliefs, habits, and feelings constitute the basic faculties by which philosophical reasoning is undertaken (e.g., our causal inferences, our belief in a world of external objects, our reliance on probable reasoning, etc.). Hume’s reflection on these matters leads him to invert the early modern (Cartesian, Lockean) trend in epistemology. His philosophy, as it progresses, moves from a perspective of “I Think” to a social one of “We Do”: “Instead of attempting to scrutinize our thought process in the hope of uncovering principles of rationality which could be applied to directing our action, Hume reversed the procedure. He began with our practice, our action, and sought to extract from it the inherent social norms” (Capaldi, 1989, p. 22). In other words, Hume understands philosophy to be an immanent practice from within the common course of human affairs by which the philosopher attempts to reconstruct partial bits of life as it is lived and observed. The philosopher with proper self-knowledge and cognizance of the limits of the philosophic enterprise turns from foundational metaphysical issues, which involve questions that human reason cannot hope to resolve, to matters of morals, politics, and aesthetics, about which we might develop a “set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hoped for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind” (Hume, 2000a, p. 177).

Hume’s view of philosophy, as communicated through the Sceptic, has important implications for his politics (Danford, 1990; Livingston, 1998; Merrill, 2015b) and his political economy (Matson, 2019). What does it have to do with happiness? Simply this: when giving policy advice, the philosopher cannot hope to rise above the insights of common ways of thinking to provide us with a definitive set of answers to questions about the good life. Although we might be able to “speak of what happiness is in the light of the natures we ourselves have” (Merrill, 2015a, p. 157), when thinking about policies and legislation,

we need to candidly recognize that there may well be more than one pathway to happiness. We can find “no absolute obligations or imperatives” (Merrill, 2015a, p. 157) for institutional design in the course of nature, only common maxims, inherited traditions, and prudential recommendations.

As indicated by the epigraph of this essay, politicians and citizens ought not look to the philosopher – or the behavioral economist – as a “*cunning man*” (an eighteenth-century phrase for magician) capable of pointing them towards the good life. Indeed, in their discourse on the good life, Hume remarks, the opinions of philosophers ought to be subject to a higher-than-normal level of scrutiny: philosophers “confine too much their principles, and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations” (Hume, 1994, p. 159); “they are led astray, not only by the narrowness of their understandings, but by that also of their passions . . . it is difficult for [them] to apprehend, that any thing, which appears totally indifferent to [them], can ever give enjoyment to any other person” (Hume, 1994, p. 160). In other words, philosophers are often guilty of imposing their own vision of happiness on others.⁵ The Sceptic is pointing out that the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Platonist have assumed that others are as they are, and find enjoyment and fulfillment as they do. We think that Hume’s indictment applies, in some instances, to behavioral paternalists, who, in arguing for the existence of true preferences, seem to believe that those preferences align with “folk wisdom” (RW, 400) or with what they themselves would prefer (e.g., less smoking, less sugar, more exercise, more savings). Rizzo and Whitman rightly refer to this as a great non-sequitur (RW, 401). To the paternalists, The Sceptic rejoins,

Do they not see the vast variety of inclinations and pursuits among our species; where each man seems fully satisfied with his own course of life, and would esteem it the greatest unhappiness to be confined to that of his neighbor? (Hume, 1994, p. 160)

3 The Political Implications of Hume’s Happiness Essays

Rizzo and Whitman argue that we should adopt a “paternalism-resisting framework” (RW, 434) in public policy given behavioral economists’ one-sided focus on human error-proneness and the slippery-slope problems posed by behavioral paternalist policies (see RW, 349–397). Their alternative framework does “not begin by seeking evidence of errors, but by seeking understanding” (RW, 434):

A paternalism-resisting framework would . . . take a more permissive attitude toward preferences that appear inconsistent and incom-

⁵As Thomas Merrill nicely puts the point, “In their zeal to offer theoretical accounts of nature, it seems, the philosophers overlooked themselves” (Merrill, 2015a, p. 159).

plete, and would then ask how people with such nonstandard preferences would approach the world. That inquiry naturally leads to exploration of people's diverse and idiosyncratic strategies of self-management, as well as how markets, families, clubs, and other voluntary associations can assist in the process. (RW, 434)

The implicit political logic of the "paternalism-resisting framework" is essentially the logic of classical liberal political thought of, for instance, Locke, Hume, Smith, and Mill.⁶ On that logic our general presumption should be that people are reasonable beings, cultivating and pursuing their values as they see fit. Given an inclusive understanding of rationality and welfare, our political efforts ought to be largely focused on securing a framework of stable rules within which individuals can peaceably live their lives. There is reason to think that such a message is an unspoken but important implication of Hume's happiness essays (Harris, 2007; Merrill, 2015a, 150–161).

Across the happiness essays Hume illustrates the natural diversity of human preferences and perspectives. Different perspectives on happiness may be especially divergent, such as the perspectives of the Epicurean and the Platonist. Members of various philosophical sects may find it difficult to find common ground for discussion; perspectives on the good life might to a large extent be incommensurable. The natural political implication of Hume's perspective is that we should shift our focus in politics, as much as we can, from considering and pursuing substantive ends towards considering and pursuing effective means that enable peaceful coexistence among individuals with different ends. In the pluralism of the modern world, it is important to respect one another's passions and goals, and seek a frame of rules that enables each of us, as much as possible, to pursue our own ends. Attempts to build a political consensus around any one theory of the good may lead to open violence and oppression.

Attempts to join politics with theories of the good in the early modern era led to a particularly dangerous fusion of politics and religion (Hume, 1994, pp. 73–79). That fusion resulted in a great deal of violence in the 17th and 18th centuries. When Hume wrote his happiness essays in the 1740s, "the memories of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, of the sack of Magdeburg in the Thirty Years' War, of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, among others, were still within reach" (Merrill, 2015b, p. 31). In light of the danger of joining religion and politics – and speculative philosophy and politics more generally (Hume, 1994, 54–63; Livingston, 1984, 8) – Hume understood the public role of the philosopher to be that of providing a calming, analytical perspective on partisan positions to facilitate agreement about the essential goals of a political order (Immerwahr, 1992; Asher, 2020b). Philosophy, "if carefully cultivated by

⁶On the connection between RW's paternalism-resisting framework and Mill's work on liberty, see Sandy Peart's contribution in this special issue.

several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society, and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling. The politician will acquire greater foresight and subtilty, in the dividing and balancing of power . . . the stability of modern governments . . . will still improve, by similar gradations” (Hume, 2000b, 8; for discussion, see Whelan, 1985, 330).

The improvement Hume speaks of comes as individuals within the polity are able to turn away from partisan theories of the good and work to shore up what we can call “constitutional conventions” (cf. Sabl, 2012, 32–34). Generally speaking, “conventions” in Hume are practices that each individual citizen finds in his or her interest to adopt, provided that he or she expects the majority of other citizens to adopt them.⁷ Hume uses his concept of convention to explain a wide range of social phenomena from language and money to gallantry, norms of chastity, and the rules of traffic (Hardin, 2007, p. 85).⁸ Constitutional conventions are practices that individuals find in their mutual interest, without which extended social life beyond the family would not be possible.⁹ Such conventions are “constitutional” because they constitute the basic structure of the polity. The most fundamental of these conventions are the rules of possession, transference by consent, and contract. Hume calls these conventions “the laws of nature”; they are everywhere inseparable from human society (Hume, 2000a, p. 311). In service to these conventions are conventions of political authority and allegiance. Political regimes warrant our support and allegiance insofar as they preserve and reinforce the rules of property, which allow for peaceable coexistence, voluntary association, and individual pursuits within the rule of law. Political orders, whatever their particular origin, warrant allegiance insofar as they preserve liberty, which is “the perfection of civil society” (Hume, 1994, p. 41). Our political economy should be built upon, and primarily concerned with reinforcing, our society’s constitutional conventions given the lack of consensus around and about the higher good.

⁷Hume’s theory of convention prefigures and can usefully be interpreted in light of the theory of David K. Lewis (1969). For discussion, see, e.g., Vanderschraaf (1998); Hardin (2007, p. 83); Matson and Klein (2021); cf. Barry (2010).

⁸Humean conventions have a flavor of what game theorists call coordination games. With traffic, for instance, it doesn’t particularly matter to us whether we drive on the right or left; what matters is that we arrive at a mutual understanding (a convention) with others such that we always drive on the same side.

⁹Constitutional conventions, therefore, cannot entirely be captured by the logic of games of pure coordination. In so far as they are necessary for extended social life, in some respect they are not “conventional” at all. Without *some* rudiments of justice, for instance, society would cease to exist. Yet constitutional conventions do have a genuinely conventional element. The existence of apolitical authority is not really “conventional” in that there is no alternative other than the crumbling of society. But the particular *type* of political authority is conventional in that there are multiple alternatives (political regimes; particular individuals to empower) around which individuals can coordinate. For discussion, see Matson and Klein (2021, pp. 8–19). See also Binmore (2005, p. 48).

4 Hume's Qualified Theory of Happiness

Although he doesn't think that we can conclude definitively what happiness is, Hume thinks it is nonetheless meaningful to discuss happiness in light of our personal understanding and assessments of human nature (Merrill, 2015a, p. 157). There is much in Hume's own understanding of happiness to corroborate Rizzo's and Whitman's inclusive, process-oriented view of rationality and welfare. For Rizzo and Whitman rationality and welfare-improving choices are "the result of a dialectical process in which the reasoner approaches an issue first from one perspective, then from another, and so on for perhaps many stages" (Rizzo and Whitman, 2018, p. 209).

We maintain that Hume's perspective on happiness prefigures that of the "Old Chicago" political economists, for example, Knight (1922) and Buchanan ([1979] 1999), who interpret welfare in broadly dynamic terms (Dold and Rizzo, 2020; Lewis and Dold, 2020). Welfare is not, on such an understanding, simply a matter of satisfying a static, well-ordered array of preferences. Welfare involves creating and refining preferences. That understanding is important in Hume. He sees that satisfaction in life is not a matter of satisfying "an existing array of wants," but of "creating new and refined tastes" (Boyd, 2008, p. 83).

Dynamic ideas about happiness come forth across Hume's work. They are, as we've mentioned, pronounced in the essay "The Stoic." Donald Livingston notes that "Hume's own view of human excellence is expressed in 'The Stoic'", and that "the task of 'The Sceptic' is 'to disentangle the speech of the Stoic from the false philosophy in which it is embedded'" (Livingston, 1998, p. 138).¹⁰ Put differently, Hume largely sympathizes with the Stoic, but qualifies his sympathies by communicating through the Sceptic that even his own views are not to be taken as sacrosanct.

Describing the view of happiness conveyed in "The Stoic," Adam Potkay notes that "our happiness is such that our endeavors toward it largely compose it" (Potkay, 2000, p. 69). Throughout "The Stoic," Hume points out that it is in action and industry that our well-being principally lies. The belief that simply satisfying our desires will satisfy us is largely an illusion. Rest and the indulgence of pleasure "becomes a fatigue"; "the mind, unexercised, finds every delight insipid and loathsome" (Hume, 1994, p. 150). We do, of course, desire pleasure. But over the desire for pleasure itself, our mind has a desire for the *pursuit* of pleasure: "there is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment; this desire seems the foundation of most of our passions and pursuits" (Hume,

¹⁰The limited comments on the nature of happiness that Hume communicates in "The Sceptic" broadly parallel the themes in "The Stoic." In his famous essay "Of Refinement in the Arts" Hume maintains that "human happiness, according to the most received notions, seems to consist in three ingredients; action, pleasure, and indolence" (Hume, 1994, p. 269). Cf. Walker (2013).

1994, p. 300). Our interest in most activities derives only very indirectly from the pleasure or utility of the ends of those activities. The usefulness of the ends is only required to “fix our attention” (Hume, 2000a, p. 288); usefulness in the ends that we pursue is chiefly valued for the meaning that it confers on the pursuit of our ends, including the fulfillment when those pursuits meet with some success. In his *Treatise* Hume illustrates the point with a hunting example: “a man of the greatest fortune, and the farthest removed from avarice, tho’ he takes pleasure in hunting after partridges and pheasants, feels no satisfaction in shooting crows and magpies; and that because he considers the first as fit for the table, and the other as entirely useless” (Hume, 2000a, p. 288). There is an interplay between the usefulness of ends and the enjoyment of the pursuit: hunter mainly enjoys the hunt itself; but the hunt is enjoyable only if there is *some* value in the prey.

Beyond the desire for action, however, the human mind – at least as it develops through social interaction in modern commercial societies¹¹ – naturally desires “liveliness,” which, as Eugene Rotwein describes it, “reflects a desire to *have* and *pursue* wants” (Rotwein, 2009, xlvii; italics in original). Hume’s ideas about our desire for liveliness correspond to a point emphasized by Knight: “Life is not fundamentally a striving for ends, for satisfactions, but rather for bases for further striving; desire is more fundamental to conduct than is achievement, or perhaps better, the true achievement is the refinement and elevation of the plane of desire, the cultivation of taste” (Knight, 1922, p. 459). The desire for liveliness is an outflow of human creativity and innovation. Our creative faculties are perhaps initially developed through external application: through art and physical industry, through exchange and the creation of value. But the mind naturally turns upon itself. *We* are our own greatest undertaking: “thou thyself shouldest also be the object of thy industry, and that by art and attention alone thou canst acquire that ability, which will raise thee to the proper station in the universe” (Hume, 1994, p. 147). The mind is the ultimate resource; the cultivation of the mind is the ultimate end towards which that resource is put.¹²

¹¹Hume notes that the desire for self-refinement in part depends on one’s perceived scope of opportunity and cultural context: “Banish those arts [of commerce] from society, you deprive men of both of action and pleasure; and leaving nothing but indolence in their place, you destroy even the relish of indolence” (Hume, 1994, p. 270).

¹²For ideas about self-refinement in Hume, see his essays on taste, “Of the Delicacy of Taste” and “Of the Standard of Taste” (in Hume, 1994). A main point is that by actively refining our taste and virtue – which are both broadly aesthetic phenomena for Hume – we appreciate a wider range of subtle and meaningful pleasures. We also, to draw again from the Stoic, derive pleasure from the pursuit of self-refinement itself. For a useful discussion of these and related matters, see Dorsey (2015).

5 Philosophy as a Scene of Conversation

The methodological and rhetorical implications of Hume's happiness essays, along with the historical way in which Hume and many other eighteenth-century Britons came to practice philosophy, extend Rizzo's and Whitman's intimation that the behavioral economist ought to engage with the public "as fellow human beings doing the best they can, trying to improve their own choices, and offering friendly advice on how others might do the same." (RW, 439). In doing so, "behavioral researchers will be less inclined to approach humanity from a position of presumed superiority, like puppet masters correcting the behavior of errant puppets." (ibid.).

Recall the above description of Hume's philosophy involving a shift – which comes forth in 'The Sceptic' – from a perspective of 'I Think' to 'We Do' (from Capaldi, 1989, 22). That shift entails a vision of philosophy that deemphasizes foundational metaphysical issues and focuses more on exploring and improving life as it is commonly experienced. The shift moves the locus of philosophy for Hume towards a program of social science and aesthetics (Hume, 2000a, 176; for discussion, see Merrill, 2015a, 58–61; Matson, 2019, 33–36).

The shift has methodological implications. Hume's newfound perspective is a "*We Do*" perspective, not an "*Others Do*" perspective. The philosopher himself is actuated by the same set of inexplicable habits, feelings, and movements of imagination that he observes in others. He is a participant in the social phenomena that he studies; he cannot simply be a detached observer. Understanding himself as a critical participant, the Humean philosopher attempts to cultivate an ethos of humility and self-awareness. This has practical egalitarian implications.¹³ Seeing the "narrow and contracted" bounds of his

¹³Hume's vision of philosophy can perhaps be interpreted as a kind of application of the contemporary idea of analytical egalitarianism, i.e., "the theoretical system that abstracts from any inherent difference among persons" (Levy and Peart, 2008, p. 1). Not only does Hume assume a universal human nature – an assumption that is central to his "science of man" – but he quite consciously applies that assumption to *himself* to inform the way in which he studies and participates in society.

Some might contend that Hume is not in fact any sort of analytical egalitarian. Levy and Peart (2004), for instance, emphasize inegalitarian implications of his views of sympathy and approbation in contrast to those of Adam Smith (for a different reading of Hume in relation to Smith on sympathy see Matson *et al.* (2019)). One might also flag Hume's disturbingly racist footnote in his essay "Of National Characters" (Hume, 1994, 208, n. 10). That footnote might be taken as evidence that Hume subscribes to a theory of polygenesis. But on a wider reading of Hume's thought, the polygenesis interpretation appears unpersuasive. Kendra Asher presents a compelling case for Hume as a monogeneticist, despite his racist footnote. She even provocatively suggests that the racist footnote itself may have been a complex – though misguided – rhetorical ploy (Asher, 2020a). Two points along these lines, drawn out in Asher's essay, are worth mentioning. First, Hume excoriates the practice of slavery on moral and economic grounds in his essay "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" (Hume, 1994, see especially 387, 396–397). Second, in his essays on commerce he leans heavily on assumptions of a common, universal human nature in explaining economic development,

own mind (Hume, 1994, p. 159) – for instance, in his perspectives on the good – the philosopher works to develop a respect for the opinions of others and an openness to conversation and learning. In his intellectual endeavors, he strives to carry himself in the practical, grounded, and agreeable manner of an “honest gentleman” or engaged citizen. He understands himself as fellow traveler of sorts, not an enlightened purveyor of truth (Hume, 2000a, p. 177).

The methodological point has a rhetorical dimension: as a fellow traveler and friendly adviser, the philosopher ought to adjust the subject and presentation of his thought so that it is suitable for discourse with his fellows.¹⁴ This rhetorical dimension comes forth both in Hume’s personal practice of philosophy and the practice of eighteenth-century philosophy generally.

In eighteenth-century Britain, philosophy took a pragmatic turn. Figures including Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope – all of whom Hume highly esteemed and imitated throughout his work – perceived in philosophy, when properly cultivated, beneficial potentialities. Philosophical engagement, these intellectuals thought, could help British citizens overcome religious superstition and enthusiasm and usher in a polite age of improvement. But for philosophy to serve this public role, it would need to take on a suitable rhetorical form. Addison and Steele pioneered such a form: the philosophical essay. Philosophical essays were written in an easy, accessible style; such essays brought philosophical insights to bear on matters of day-to-day importance for the citizen. These essays quickly became an essential form of discourse on moral, political, economic, artistic, and scientific matters.¹⁵ Alex Benichmol describes the ethos of this discourse as characterized by “openness, tolerance, and moral seriousness”; discussion of philosophical essays in England and Scotland approached a “normative model of critical discourse in the Habermasian sense” (2010, 46).

Hume embraced the philosophical essay.¹⁶ He briefly characterizes these efforts in a short piece, “Of Essay Writing”, which was published in 1742 but later withdrawn from his published works. In that essay he fashions himself “as a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation.” He takes it as his “constant Duty to promote a good Correspondence betwixt these two States, which have so great a Dependence

not only in Western Europe, but also in Asia (see “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” and “Of the Balance of Trade” in Hume (1994)). On Hume’s reliance in his theorizing on a radical “psychological egalitarianism,” see Hundert (1974, p. 141). See also Schabas’s (2021) account of “the progress of reason” and its explanatory role in Hume’s political economy.

¹⁴On the connected developments in philosophy and rhetoric in eighteenth-century Britain, see Howell (1971).

¹⁵For further discussion on the philosophical essay and the remarkable scene of voluntary associations in England and Scotland, in which these essays were discussed and debated, see McElroy (1969); Clark (2000); Phillipson (1981); Habermas (1991).

¹⁶On Hume’s literary development and its relation to his philosophy see Box (1990).

on each other.” “The Materials of this Commerce must chiefly be furnish’d by Conversation and common Life: The manufacturing of them [the materials of social commerce] alone belongs to Learning” (Hume, 1994, p. 535). In other words, as Hume sees it, the philosopher is to mix with the larger body of citizens in order to promote a mutually improving conversation. The philosopher considers matters of interest through participation in day-to-day affairs; he offers reflective interpretations of these affairs, for the sake of understanding and improvement, back to his fellow citizens. In an important sense, then, from this essay we can say that Hume conceived of philosophy as “a two-way process, paradigmatically embodied in conversation” (Finlay, 2007, p. 63).¹⁷

The understanding of philosophy as a two-way conversation fits nicely with the arc of Hume’s happiness essays. From the Sceptic, we see that we cannot definitively determine what the good means, how the good life cashes out in context, for different people at different points in time. But we must learn to square that insight with the fact that we genuinely believe that there is a good, that there is meaning in pursuing and reforming our ideas about welfare, and that those ideas have significance for the welfare of others. For Hume, it would seem, we ought to square the insight of the Sceptic with our own convictions of the good by engaging in constructive social discourse, discourse through which we offer our perspectives to others and attempt to persuade, but also through which we are afforded an opportunity to reflect on our own convictions. Hume himself was involved in a number of voluntary associations and clubs that carried on such a discourse for the purpose of personal edification and social improvement. The aim of one club he helped found in 1754, the Edinburgh Select Society, was described in 1755 by the *Scots Magazine*. Its members seek “by practice to improve themselves in reasoning and eloquence, and by the freedom of debate, to discover the most effectual methods of promoting the good of the country” (quoted in Phillipson, 1974, 444). Some of the questions discussed by the society, incidentally, are still today of interest to behavioral economists and policy makers, for example, “Whether lotteries ought to be encouraged” or “Whether Whiskie ought not to be laid under such restraints, as to render the use of it less frequent” (Extract from the Select Society Question Book, n.d). Not all participants in these discussions, of course, shared Hume’s sensibilities. But the mode of philosophy through free debate and conversation for the sake of personal and public improvement is Humean in spirit.

¹⁷For an elaboration of Hume’s conception of the philosopher as an “ambassador” see Livingston (1988).

6 Conclusion

What are the implications of the Humean method, rhetoric, and public practice of philosophy for behavioral welfare economics? First, when it comes to theorizing – and especially formulating policy – about health, wealth, and happiness (i.e., welfare), behavioral economists would do well to adopt a more Humean ethos. They should follow the Sceptic in recognizing that there is more than one conception of the good life. Although behavioral economists may accept this claim, the understanding that rational behavior consists in living as if one were a neoclassical economic agent with stable, transitive, and context-independent preferences would suggest otherwise. Second, in light of the plurality of good lives to be lived and in light of our inability to define the good for others, behavioral economists ought to view themselves, as Rizzo and Whitman suggest, as “friendly voices” (RW, 438) in an ongoing conversation. Like Hume, behavioral economists should offer their constructive findings as “advice columnists” (RW, 438) in a qualified, voluntary manner that seeks to contribute to the well-being of their fellow citizens. Finally, as a rhetorical matter, behavioral economists should present their findings, their psychological and experimental research and theories, as friendly advice directly to their coequal fellow citizens, not as if to a benevolent autocrat (cf. Sugden, 2018, 19–23). They should offer their insights up in conversation, as the eighteenth-century Britons did in the coffee houses and drinking clubs of London and Edinburgh and in periodicals such as *The Spectator*, *the Tatler*, *Scots Magazine*, and, for a brief time, *The Edinburgh Review*. They should employ argumentative persuasion, not paternalist coercion or subtle manipulation of the choice set through political measures (cf. Hausman and Welch, 2010, 130–136). Behavioral economists looking for real-world application of their work would likely be “equipped with greater humility, greater respect for nonstandard preferences, and greater awareness of the surprising functionality of real-world behavior.” (RW, 439).

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