

# Hume and Mandeville on Division of Labour, or, the World of Invention

[Hume e Mandeville: Sobre a Divisão do Trabalho, ou, o Mundo da Invenção]

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**Abstract:** This article proposes approximations between Hume and Mandeville based on the way each of them understands the division of labour as a modern phenomenon characteristic of European commercial societies. The starting point, common to both, is the idea that man, or human nature, is an animal moved by passions that are very similar, if not identical, to those of other animals, notably mammals. The anthropology underlying the division of labour thus has a physiological root. The same paradox interests these authors: the process of the division of labour, which enables the production of so many excellent artefacts, is the labour of unqualified artisans. There is, therefore, a disparity between the product and the principle that engenders it. As we intend to show, this is the leitmotiv of a critique, addressed by Hume, of the teleological proofs of the existence of God.

**Keywords:** Anthropology. Commerce. Division of labour. Imagination. Invention.

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe aproximações entre Hume e Mandeville a partir do modo como cada um deles entende a divisão do trabalho como um fenômeno moderno característico das sociedades comerciais europeias. O ponto de partida, comum a ambos, é a ideia de que o homem, ou a natureza humana, é um animal movido por paixões muito semelhantes, senão idênticas, às de outros animais, notadamente os mamíferos. A antropologia subjacente à divisão do trabalho tem, portanto, uma raiz fisiológica. O mesmo paradoxo interessa a esses autores: o processo de divisão do trabalho, que possibilita a produção de tantos artefatos excelentes, é o trabalho de artesãos não qualificados. Há, portanto, uma disparidade entre o produto e o princípio que o engendra. Como pretendemos mostrar, este é o leitmotiv de uma crítica, dirigida por Hume, às provas teleológicas da existência de Deus.

**Palavras-chave:** Antropologia. Comércio. Divisão do trabalho. Imaginação. Invenção.

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The word “artifice” can be misleading. At first glance, it suggests something that happens naturally, beyond human imagination. In Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, the “inventions” of poets and philosophers (HUME 2007, I, 3, 1) are said to be “artificial”, which suggests the sense of something arbitrary, capricious or fanciful, which is imposed on the natural habits of the imagination, now delighting it, now harming it. But the imagination seems susceptible to these resources, calmly accepting them when they arise from habit, a less arbitrary origin than philosophical reason or poetic fantasy. In the section devoted to the idea of personal identity (IDEM, I, 4, 6), Hume notes that although a sudden change in the part of a body suppresses the idea that it would remain identical to itself in relation to what it was before, a gradual change tends to be less offensive, and the imagination does not hesitate to attribute, to a body that has slowly turned into another, the same identity as it had in the beginning. This is an artifice, and it is not the only one in question.

But whatever precaution we may use in introducing the changes gradually, and making them proportionable to the whole, 'tis certain, that where the changes are at last observ'd to become considerable, we make a scruple of ascribing identity to such different objects. There is, however, another artifice, by which we may induce the imagination to advance a step farther; and that is, by producing a reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some *common end* or purpose. A ship, of which a considerable part has been chang'd by frequent reparations, is still consider'd as the same; nor does the difference of the materials hinder us from ascribing an identity to it. The common end, in which the parts conspire, is the same under all their variations, and affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation of the body to another. (IDEM).

The usefulness of the object, the use to which it is intended, allows a constant unity to be attributed to it, despite successive alterations that have completely modified it. A warship or merchantman, for example, once baptized with a name, remains the same in human conception and language, no matter the extent to which it is made up of new materials, has taken on a new form, etc. However, the artifice is not confused, in this case, with the name, which is its sign, which only reinforces it and guarantees, over time, that nothing has changed, since the essential (utility) remains. The inference is clear: what applies to the identity of a vessel also equally applies to the identity of a person.

With these considerations, Hume directly reaches the classical idea of the subject as a substance or support for representations. On the other hand, it opens a way for the physiological conception of subjectivity and the investigation, which will take place from the second half of the 18th century, into the origin of representations in the physiology of the human body. This brings us back to the *Treatise* itself, or, more precisely, to the passage mentioned at the beginning, about artifice, and which it is now appropriate to quote. What emerges in it is the anthropological origin of the artifice as a necessity inscribed in the configuration of the human species, which Hume, as a good naturalist, understands from a broader nature, called “animal”.

Of all the animals, with which this globe is peopled, there is none towards whom nature seems, at first sight, to have exercis'd more cruelty than towards man, in the numberless wants and necessities, with which she has loaded him, and in the slender means, which she affords to the relieving these necessities. In other creatures these two particulars generally compensate each other. If we consider the lion as a voracious and carnivorous animal, we shall easily discover him to be very necessitous; but if we turn our eye to his make and temper, his agility, his courage, his arms, and his force, we shall find, that his advantages hold proportion with his wants. The sheep and ox are depriv'd of all these advantages; but their appetites are moderate, and their food is of easy purchase. In man alone, this unnatural conjunction of infirmity, and of necessity, may be observ'd in its greatest perfection. Not only the food, which is requir'd for his sustenance, flies his search and approach, or at least requires his labour to be produc'd, but he must be possess'd of cloaths and lodging, to defend him against the injuries of the weather; tho' to consider him only in himself, he is provided neither with arms, nor force, nor other natural abilities, which are in any degree answerable to so many necessities. (IDEM, III, 2, 2).

Hume's naturalism can be seen in its full force in this passage. To understand why, in the sphere of human activity, artifices and inventions multiply to infinity, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes as impositions, it is necessary to go back to the organic configuration of the species, where there is a fundamental disproportion between needs or physiological deficiencies and the anatomical resources that would make it possible to supply them. It appears, then, with a

mixture of amazement and delight, that humans, unlike other animals, lack that grace or decorum that is discerned in the elegant adjustment between means and ends. Or rather: human nature can obtain for itself this distinction, which the philosopher shifts from rhetoric to anthropology, provided he strives to do so. Art, far from being a contradictory nature, is, in this case, its extension, and deserves, as Hume elsewhere reminds us, the epithet of “la belle nature”. (“Of simplicity and refinement in writing”, HUME 1985).

This observation is only possible because Hume dilutes the individual in the species and the species in the animal kingdom: by observing animals, we understand ourselves, recognizing that we are like them, uniquely sensitive creatures, in which what used to be an intellectual substrate now emerges as an effect of organic functions. This topic, recurrent in the skeptical tradition, was recovered by Mandeville, who bases the moral description of humans on the physiological constitution of the species (HUNDERT, 1994, p. 38-9). Unlike Hume, however, Mandeville in his “Remark (R.)” inserts anthropology into a zoology of predators, teaching that, as there is no difference between the shape of the stomach of these animals, including man, “rage” is the dominant passion in all of them, constantly brought on by hunger. Passions thus have a physiological foundation. (*Fable 1*, p. 202-3) Hume, more cautious, does not go so far as to link the theory of the passions to a physiological basis, restricting himself to taking physiology as the background of an anthropology (PIMENTA, 2020). Hence the provocations of Philo, who, in the *Dialogues on Natural Religion* declares that reason is nothing more than an instinct, which is not exclusive to the human species either, being shared with other animals. (CLERO, 1998, p. 208-9) Specifically human is, rather, the natural disproportion between the ends and means that characterizes the species, which explains why “our” reason seems to be so special as it has to deal with difficulties that other animals, probably as rational as we are, do just not know. Hence the origin of those institutions, such as justice and government, that humans invent in order to be able to satisfy needs and deficiencies that would otherwise remain open. (DELEUZE, 1955)

However, and this is fundamental, as long as the instinct is given, the institution is created. The illustration of this point from the question of justice leads Hume to detail his characterization of the human species, whose natural inelegance is compensated by the ability to invent.

To avoid giving offence, I must here observe, that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word, *natural*, only as oppos’d

to *artificial*. In another sense of the word; as no principle of the human mind is more natural than a sense of virtue; so no virtue is more natural than justice. Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as any thing that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflexion. Tho' the rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*. Nor is the expression improper to call them *Laws of Nature*; if by natural we understand what is common to any species, or even if we confine it to mean what is inseparable from the species. (HUME 2007, III, 2, 1)

By determining the meaning of the word "natural" as what is common to the species, Hume opens up a field in which the different elements of the expression "human nature" will be combined, understood not as a substantial entity, nor as the insignia of superiority in relation to other natures, but as the distinguishing and limiting mark of what differentiates it from the others (the "mondes spécifiques" that Deleuze speaks about). Thus, the idea of justice can be called "natural" insofar as it "immediately derives from original principles" of human nature without "intervention of thought or reflection". Justice is, therefore, a spontaneous product of the activity of human beings who live together and who, in this interaction, are impelled to establish rules that clearly say what is allowed or prohibited, right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious. These rules vary according to experience: what is right for a Greek is not for a Frenchman, Christian virtue does not coincide with that of the Koran. Everywhere distinctions are found, and they are, with proper adjustments, interchangeable. The most important thing is that they always repeat the same pattern, established by the human imagination as a means of qualifying experience.

The distinction between the artificial – an extension of nature – and the arbitrary – contingent in relation to it – raises the question of how far the artifice is guided by an intention. The case of justice illustrates the problem well. If the general intention of the rules of justice is carried out, to a greater or lesser extent, in every human society, giving cohesion to it, another question is whether they do it well, in order to really fill the gap that the artifice would have to fill. Historical experience shows that there are rules of justice that account for this and which allow men to develop the potentials that are part of their imagination, while others are bad, as they generate instability and do not produce the regularity necessary for the cultivation of the arts and sciences (that is, the mechanical or liberal arts, philosophy and science). Herein lies the ten-

sion between intentionality and effectiveness: the adoption of a design does not follow its realization. It is certain that man, “as a rational being... seldom acts or speaks without a purpose or intention” (HUME 1748, p. 33). Another thing is to know whether this design fits in with natural or instinctual dispositions. This is not always the case, as the “but” that opens the following sentence suggests: “But nature may also be opposed to artifice, as well as to what is rare and unusual; and in this sense it may be disputed, whether the notions of virtue be natural or not” (HUME 2007, III, 1, 2). Natural is occasionally opposed to unusual and artificial; and the whole work of the moralist consists of proving that moral distinctions are natural devices, and, having done this, that the institutions of justice can be said to be a natural extension, by means of artificial devices, of dispositions of human nature. Inventing is, without proper meaning, finding the path of nature.

Hume thus combines the two meanings of invention distinguished by Bacon: rhetorical invention, which finds and combines given commonplaces, and mechanical invention, which, from given rules, produces new, previously unknown objects. In one case, genius is required, which is the ability to find the new among the old, the unknown among the known. On the other hand, luck is required: reaching for the new where it does not allow itself to be glimpsed. In both, the base is training and learning: in the liberal arts, the formation of the spirit; in mechanics, the discipline of the body. Rhetorical invention and mechanical invention differ further in that the former deals with general ideas, the latter applies to particular situations. Paradoxically, therefore, although rhetorical-poetic invention is of a higher nature, and more difficult to be successfully practiced, mechanical invention, though lower and unworthy of “liberal” genius, has to contend with countless particular, unpredictable difficulties that arise as knowledge of experience advances. This is, therefore, that which demands constant attention and a more robust spirit. The artisan has an excellence, and his *métier* is not to be confused with that of the simple worker:

And Plato, more than once, observes, that particulars are infinite, that the highest generalities give no certain directions; and, therefore, that the marrow of all sciences, whereby the artist is distinguished from the unskilful workman, consists in middle propositions, which experience has delivered and taught in each particular science. Hence those who write upon the first inventors of things, and the origin of the sciences, rather celebrate chance than art, and bring in beasts, birds, fishes, and serpents, rather than men, as the first teachers of arts. (BACON 2001,

book V, chap. 2)

The complexity of art explains the procedural and cumulative character of mechanical invention, which depends more on chance than oratory art, which is based on discipline and study. It follows that objects of mechanical invention are subject to constant improvement, which is not the case of oratory invention, which usually reaches its peak at certain times, which critics salute in unison. (Demosthenes and Cicero are the consensual models, at least since Plutarch paired them up in *Parallel Lives*, Hume agrees with him in his essay “Of eloquence”) (HUME 1985). Let us think, for example, of the ship, says Bacon, “that very noble object, which transports goods from one place to another, and distributes its fruits to the most remote regions of the planet”; the philosopher asks himself: could anyone, in their right mind, consider something as perfect as a poem? (BACON 2001, book I, end). An exemplary composition such as that of Virgil does not allow for addition or improvement; its form is finished in view of the intention that is declared in the choice of genre and in the proem of the work, and in the voice adopted by the poet; a vessel, however excellent it may be, always admits alterations, additions or variations that make it more suitable for use, adapting it to different circumstances. Conclusion: mechanical invention is infinite, oratory has a determinate optimum, which, once achieved, is recognized by all as such.

Bacon’s ship is identified with commercial activity, unlike the smaller ships of Antiquity, certainly used in commerce, but devised for war. A modern invention, we will find Bacon’s merchant ship everywhere in Hume’s writings, starting with the *History of England*, where it plays an important role in the arrival of Europeans in the East Indies and the Americas (HUME 1983, Chap. 26, Book 3). In other passages, Hume highlights, in short and incisive sentences, the periods in English history when shipbuilding became one of the responsibilities provided for by the Crown and Parliament (IDEM, Appendix 3, Book IV) and that the slow growth of the English naval fleet proved insufficient to match, both in terms of quantity but also in the quality, those of rival nations (IDEM, Appendix, Book V). This last observation is of paramount importance since, if ships are manufactured to transport goods, and the extraction of goods has become, in the modern world, greater than ever, thereby increasing their circulation, it is necessary for the sovereign, who encourages this activity and expects a return from it, to have a large fleet that works as a link between the main stages of commercial activity, the extraction, circulation, and exchange of goods; a virtuous process that will lead, in turn, to an increase in manufactu-

ring, and, with it, to the collection of taxes. A merchant navy must, therefore, be formed by ships suitable for carrying out such an important activity, which is the fulcrum of the commercial system: complex vessels, of varying dimensions, with appropriate mechanisms, designed with this use in mind and built to execute it. In other words, the “perfection” of a vessel like the modern cargo ship is related to the efficiency with which it allows the use for which it was intended to be carried out.

The *History of England* applies a precept established in the *Treatise*, according to which

[m]ost of the works of art are esteem'd beautiful, in proportion to their fitness for the use of man, and even many of the productions of nature derive their beauty from that source. Handsome and beautiful, on most occasions, is not an absolute but a relative quality, and pleases us by nothing but its tendency to produce an end that is agreeable. (HUME 2007, III, 3, 1).

A commercial ship is beautiful and “produces a pleasant end” when it is able to do what is expected of it. Utility determines the value of the object. The human propensity to judge things by this parameter is so strong that we tend to extend it, without further ado, from “works of art” made by man to “productions of nature” as if these were also objects made by an art based on accumulated and improved precepts, according to circumstances, over centuries of experience. But this assimilation will prove hasty, and it to some extent distorts the idea of fabrication. The approximation between natural and human things through the functional unit bias tends to link the unitary and systematic character of these indistinct artistic products to the idea of producing causes that, in one case as in the other, would act voluntarily from an established end, from an outlined project. Everything takes place as if natural products were in fact works of art and all art were rhetorical-poetic, as if everything manufactured obeyed an intelligent design and had a finished perfection, which can be recognized without difficulty – as if a constitution, for example, were formally the political analogue of a vessel, both manufactured according to an intention and endowed with a deliberately calculated form to respond to an end. And why not apply the same reasoning to natural products? From the expansion of the idea of utility, the imagination of *homo artifex* will pass, without hesitation, to the idea of finality, attributing to natural things an artificiality that does not

belong to them, and consigning to artificial things an absolute perfection that they do not have. (HUME 1976, V, p. 190) Hume pays special attention to this topic in the *Treatise*.

But this is still more remarkable, when we add a *sympathy* of parts to their *common end*, and suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations. This is the case with all animals and vegetables; where not only the several parts have a reference to some general purpose, but also a mutual dependence on, and connexion with each other. The effect of so strong a relation is, that tho' every one must allow, that in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a total change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size, and substance are entirely alter'd. An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak; tho' there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same. An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity. (HUME 2007, I, 4, 6).

The parts are not linked only by the idea, strong enough, of a common use or end, but also by the idea that they operate in conjunction, in a coordinated way, in the production of that end, thereby constituting a whole. The human imagination took a leap, and went from manufactured objects to generated beings, from the world of artifice to that of nature, levelling them to such a point that it is ready to establish a connection between them: henceforth, natural beings will be thought of under the aegis of a technique, of a superhuman mechanical art, as more perfect than ours, a divine fabrication that adds to the common end between the parts of an object the sympathy between them, something that our art could not strictly do, only in the form of a defective emulation (the mechanism gives a pale picture of the organism). We are one step away from linking this object to a single intelligence. We know, however, thanks to Hume (and Bacon), that the objects of art, if they are derived from a plan, depend, in order to be well executed, on the happy combination of actions and circumstances. Contrary, therefore, to what theists want, they do not offer an adequate analogue to the relationship between the *artifex* God and the machine-world: divine art, if such a thing exists, would have to be perfect, not experimental.

But, just as it is possible to conclude, from the postulated relationship between God and the World, on the one hand, and man and his works, on the other, by

the disparity between the human intellect and the divine intellect, it is also possible, and sometimes necessary, to inquire whether, from the perfection attributed to a work, the perfection of an intellect supposedly responsible for it. In Part 5 of the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, it is a question of inverting the argumentative point of view of the *Treatise*. Philo the skeptic invites us now to accept, for a moment, that human works are similar to divine works and that the difference between man's and God's intellect is merely one of degree. Let it be so. However, we can see what an object of human technique is.

When we survey a ship, we may get an exalted idea of the ingenuity of the carpenter who built such a complicated, useful, and beautiful machine. But then we shall be surprised to find that the carpenter is a stupid tradesman who imitated others, and followed a trade which has gradually improved down the centuries, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies. Perhaps our world is like that ship. It may be that many worlds were botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, before our present system was built; much labour lost, many useless trials made, and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the world-making trade. In such subjects as this, who can determine what is true—who indeed can even guess what is probable—when so many hypotheses can be put forward, and even more can be imagined? (HUME 1976, V, p. 191).

If God made the world, would he not be an artisan who, like any other manufacturer, would have benefited from the advances in “the art of making worlds”? This analogy does not suggest that his “successes” would have to do with an unusual event, the fact that, at a given moment, the conditions for the fabrication of an admirable or an excellent world would have been obtained, let us say, even, “the best of all worlds possible”? A cosmogonic inference to which Philo's argument invites readers of the *History of England*: does not the good use of imagination depend on the enjoyment of minimum conditions of stability, or on the presence of laws observed by all with a minimum of constancy? Now, if this is so, in order to manufacture a world like ours, conflicts would have to be resolved and conflagrations between gods, titans and others, which prevented the divine craftsman from carrying out his work, would have to be resolved. Not content with leaving this bizarre suggestion hovering in the reader's mind, Philo unfolds it, questioning Cleanto in the following terms:

And what shadow of an argument, continued Philo, can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove that God is one being? A great many men join together to build a house or ship, to found and develop a city, to create a commonwealth; why couldn't several gods combine in designing and making a world? This would only serve to make divine activities more like human ones. By sharing the work among several gods we can reduce still further the attributes of each one of them; we can get rid of the extensive power and knowledge that we have to suppose the one God to possess (if there is only one)—the extent of power and knowledge which, according to you, serves merely to weaken the argument for God's existence. And if such foolish, vicious creatures as men can often unite in forming and carrying out one plan, think how much more could be done by those gods or semi-gods whom we may suppose to be quite a lot more perfect than we are! (HUME, 1976, V, p. 192).

This argument could be considered nothing short of perverse, if not inconsequential, were it not for certain underlying implications. Philo's words echo the "Dialogue 3" of *Fable of the Bees Part II*, where Mandeville observes that it would be a mistake to think that the excellence of a technical object corresponds to a high conception that would preside over its manufacture, firmly guiding it towards an end. In commercial society, the idea of manufacturing is no longer linked to the image of the Aristotelian artisan who moulds matter from a shape and is now elucidated by the division of labour, a device for organizing production that does not require an intelligent conception and uses dull artisans who carry out their work according to technical precepts transmitted from generation to generation, and, if at all, organized by a master builder – who is also not responsible for the supposed original conception of the object in question.

Cleo. To Men who never turn'd their Thoughts that way, it certainly is almost in-conceivable to what prodigious Height, from next to nothing, some Arts may be and have been raised by human Industry and Application, by the uninterrupted Labour, and joint Experience of many Ages, tho' none but Men of ordinary Capacity should ever be employ'd in them. What a Noble as well as Beautiful, what a glorious Machine is a First-Rate Man of War, when she is under Sail, well rigg'd, and well

mann'd! As in Bulk and Weight it is vastly superior to any other moveable Body of human Invention, so there is no other that has an equal Variety of differently surprizing Contrivances to boast of. There are many Sets of Hands in the Nation, that, not wanting proper Materials, would be able in less than half a Year to produce, fit out, and navigate a First-Rate: yet it is certain, that this Task would be impracticable, if it was not divided and subdivided into a great Variety of different Labours; and it is as certain, that none of these Labours require any other, than working Men of ordinary Capacities.

Hor. What would you infer from this?

Cleo. That we often ascribe to the Excellency of Man's Genius, and the Depth of his Penetration, what is in Reality owing to length of Time, and the Experience of many Generations, all of them very little differing from one another in natural Parts and Sagacity. And to know what it must have cost to bring that Art of making Ships for different Purposes, to the Perfection in which it is now, we are only to consider in the first place; that many considerable Improvements have been made in it within these fifty years and less; and in the Second, that the Inhabitants of this Island did build and make use of Ships eighteen hundred Years ago, and that from that time to this, they have never been without.

Hor. Which all together make a strong Proof of the slow Progress that Art has made, to be what it is. (*Fable 2*, p. 141-143)

The division of labour, with its prodigious results, is the result of the “slow progress of art”, which gropes, corrects its steps, adjusts itself; in short, it is a procedure much more experimental than intellectual. As Jean-Pierre Sérís explains when commenting on this point, “the division of labour is the instrument that allows mediocre men to produce so many marvels, and it is also the intermediary or mediation that allows us to understand that, from the (so mediocre) worker to the (so excellent) work, the consequence is given, without the need for the intervention of genius” (SÉRIS, 1994, p. 35). There is here a glaring disproportion between effect and cause. Mandeville explores it in the moral sense, pointing to the fact that it is by no means necessary to educate the artisan beyond the acquisition of mediocre skills, which he uses with very limited competence (his dexterity barely deserves the name, it is almost clumsy). More

important, however, is the observation that the division of labour is, as Hundert says, “the necessary consequence of the unplanned development of specialized skills”, which can only happen in a society regulated by “written laws”, sufficiently stable so that there can be the transmission of skills of individuals from one generation to another, which results in the combination between them in the production of an object of such complexity, with the result that none of the artisans could ever conceive it by themselves (HUNDERT, 1994, p. 195-96). Once these conditions are given, the process is permeated by a need, but it remains, in any case, disconnected from all teleology: what makes possible the concrete realization of the vessel is not the conception of an idea, but the use, increasingly necessary, which imposes it as an unavoidable reality. (TOLONEN, 2013 p. 82-83)

It would be a difficult Task to enumerate all the Advantages and different Benefits, that accrue to a Nation on account of Shipping and Navigation; but if we only take into Consideration the Ships themselves, and every Vessel great and small that is made use of for Water-Carriage, from the least Wherry to a First Rate Man of War: the Timber and Hands that are employed in the Building of them; and consider the Pitch, Tar, Rosin, Grease; the Masts, Yards, Sails and Riggings; the Variety of Smiths Work, the Cables, Oars and every thing else belonging to them, we shall find that to furnish only such a Nation as ours with all these Necessaries makes a up a considerable part of the Traffick of *Europe*, without speaking of the Stores and Ammunition of all sorts, that are consumed in them, or the Mariners, Watermen and others with their Families, that are maintained by them. (*Fable 1*, p. 359-60)

The sequence of this harangue is well known: from the praise of navigation, Mandeville goes on to enumerating the “calamities” resulting from it, a kind of corollary of the stupidity of the artisans who first built ships and those who, in the modern world, continue to do so, even though under a superintendent with knowledge of an art which at this point is already millenary.

Hume, for his part, also considers the division of labour a prodigious phenomenon, which, in a way, is rooted in human nature itself. But not in the sense in which Mandeville thinks it. Of course, the origin of the division of labour is that anthropological flaw we referred to at the beginning.

'Tis by society alone that man is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them. By society all his infirmities are compensated; and tho' in that situation his wants multiply every moment upon him, yet his abilities are still more augmented, and leave him in every respect more satisfied and happy, than 'tis possible for him, in his savage and solitary condition, ever to become. When every individual person labours a-part, and only for himself, his force is too small to execute any considerable work; his labour being employ'd in supplying all his different necessities, he never attains a perfection in any particular art; and as his force and success are not at all times equal, the least failure in either of these particulars must be attended with inevitable ruin and misery. Society provides a remedy for these *three* inconveniences. By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: By the partition of employments, our ability encreases: And by mutual succour we are less expos'd to fortune and accidents. 'Tis by this additional *force, ability, and security*, that society becomes advantageous. (HUME, 2007, III, 2, 2)

The division of labour shows that human nature is destined for society, and it also shows that it is not destined for speculation. Here we have the two senses of the artifice, positive in the case of making ships, negative in the case of making the idea of God. The production process of a ship or vessel, with its multiple uses, so fundamental to commerce, is enough to warn us against the old prejudice of the proportion between excellent effects, on the one hand, and unique and/or excellent causes on the other. Rigorous reflection on technique thus constitutes an antidote, perhaps the most effective, against the belief of theists, who are nothing more than inventors – in the negative sense of the expression – of things that the human imagination can perfectly do without. We live, it is true, in a world in which invention, a conspicuous feature of human nature, seems to have triumphed definitively; but let us not be mistaken: if its affirmation became possible, it is because, henceforth, it is no longer possible to confuse it with the idea of creation. The era of the great philosophical systems is followed, in the pages of Hume, by the era of commerce.

The disproportion between needs and means of satisfying them has a counterpart in the imperfection of art, which makes it possible to perform these means in an imperfect way and is, therefore, a constant experimentation. This goes for ships as well as for constitutions: just as the modern merchant ship is a

triumph of historical patience, good constitutions (Hume mentions in the *History of England* the 1688 arrangement; in the *Essays*, the French State) are also owed much more to the combination of historical factors rather than forecasting and planning. And yet these happy results, wherever they occur, seem to awaken in men a craving for something better, or the idea that a good result could be excellent. Hume has precious pages about it in the *Essays*, starting with the aforementioned, devoted to eloquence, in which he delights in noting that oratory is such a difficult art that the best orators have not achieved perfection (“Of eloquence”, HUME, 1985). A similar observation is found in the essay dedicated to the art of writing, which highlights that the desirable combination of simplicity and refinement is more of a guideline than something achievable: the best poets approach it, without, however, fully realizing it. (“Of simplicity and refinement”, HUME, 1985) The optimum in art is fleeting, which even justifies the effort, always renewed, if not to achieve it, at least to approach it through emulation. We remain within the framework of the anthropological cleavage established in the *Treatise*: what human imagination is capable of conceiving as desirable is not fully feasible, and, in the case of poetics, the satisfaction of a yearning is often the cue for the expectation to be engendered that this experience could be even more refined. Everything depends, of course, on the degree of delicacy that nature has consigned to each individual, which, however, once satiated, can transmit to others, less fortunate, a simile of its unique sensation. (“Of the delicacy of taste and passion,” HUME, 1985) Perfection, which theists treated as an ontological quality, attributing it to the world and to the wise creative intelligence, has now become, in Hume’s hands, an anthropological yearning.

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