

# From Character to Nature

## Pope's "Ruling Passion" and Hume's "Predominant Inclination"

---

DÁNIEL TAKÁCS

---

*Abstract: This paper discusses the theory of passions of Alexander Pope (1688–1744) and David Hume (1711–1776). It focusses on two phrases: “ruling passion” by Pope and “predominant inclination” by Hume. This study attempts to demonstrate that Hume used his term with a similar meaning to that of Pope. The importance of the passions in the conduct of human life, according to these authors, involves a sceptical attitude towards the capabilities of reason. This paper attempts to show the manifestations of this attitude in Pope’s satires on human characters and in the characterisation of a false philosopher and philosophy by Hume.*

In this paper, I will follow two different lines of thought. One is a philosophical and—so to say—theoretical line, the other a historical and literary one. The theoretical line of thought concerns the empirical epistemology of eighteenth-century British philosophy. The central figure here will be David Hume. As for the literary line of thought, I will focus on the features of a literary genre: character writing, or—to use a more specific name—“character Sketches.”<sup>1</sup> These features have their origin in ancient times, and the history of the genre leads through the Renaissance and Classicism. The main figure here, in whose artistic works the tendencies and different features of the genre meet and sometimes oppose each other, will be the Augustan poet and satirist, Alexander Pope.

I connect the philosophical and the literary through the term “sceptical” or “scepticism,” which I use to designate not a theory of epistemology but an empirical *attitude* manifested in the movement of thoughts. In connection with this attitude, I am able

---

1 For a concise definition of the genre, see Bowley.

to delineate a problem which is relatively common with Hume and Pope.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that through the lens of such a sceptical attitude, the human capability of reason *par excellence* loses its power and gives way to the instincts and passions of the individual. When the principles of reason collapse, the moral theorist needs to invent new guidelines to construct a coherent conception of morality. What is important to note here is that in the works of Pope and Hume this is not just a theoretical or epistemological problem. The sceptical attitude towards reason leads the sceptic to the terrain of disbelief concerning traditional moral virtues.<sup>3</sup> Before I proceed to the detailed analysis of the Humean theory of passions and Popean satirical character writing, I would like to make some preliminary remarks on the phrases “ruling passion” and “predominant inclination.” When Pope uses the term “ruling passion,” he uses it consistently—which certainly does not mean that his *theory* of the “ruling passion” would be coherent. In the works of Hume, on the other hand, the terminology is inconsistent: he uses the phrase “ruling passion” in his autobiographical essay, “My Own Life,” but before that, in his theoretical writings, he uses the term “predominant inclination” in a more or less similar way. In addition, his *Treatise* has at least two or three alternative phrases for this “predominant inclination”—including “predominant passion,” “prevailing affection,” and “prevailing passion.” Hume also does not have an explicit theory upon which we could thread these terms, but that does not mean that we could not extract a coherent line of thought from his writings, one that has a remarkable connection with Pope’s terminology and the problem of the human character in general. I have chosen for the title of this study “predominant inclination,” because Hume mostly uses this term and because this is the phrase which is present in all three treatises by Hume that are discussed here. In what follows, I outline Pope’s theory of a “ruling passion” and how it connects to the tradition of character writing. I will then proceed to the Humean theory of passions and the characters of philosophers.

---

2 In his book, Fred Parker outlines the intellectual history of this “sceptical attitude.” The author discerns a close similarity between Humean and Popean scepticism. Although on a different level and focusing on different concepts, I would also emphasise this similarity in my study.

3 There are numerous tendencies underlying this claim. From the fifteenth century onwards, the religious movement of the reformation criticised the authority of the Catholic Church, the synods, and the Pope, concerning the truth of faith and, indirectly, the ethics of a community. This had an enormous impact not just across the continent but in England, too. Fideism—for example, Pascal—criticised the attempts to create a universalistic, reasonable faith with the help of natural theology.

## I

In 1730, Pope told one of his friends, Joseph Spence, that he has a “New Hypothesis” about a prevailing passion of the mind, “which continues till death” (qtd. in Boyce 105). After this episode, the hypothesis appeared in three poems, in the *Essay on Man*, and in the first and second epistles of the so-called *Moral Essays*. Although Pope called it a “New Hypothesis,” “ruling passion” was neither a completely new term nor an original theory. As for the theory, there is the probability of the influence of Horace, Montaigne, Bacon, Dryden, and Young. As for the term itself, some less-famous writers before Pope—the Earl of Roscommon and Matthew Prior—had used it in their writings, albeit only very rarely and accidentally (Boyce 105–114). Maynard Mack’s statement could be paradigmatic here: “There is nothing original about the conception, which was of course implied in humoral psychology and medicine, in the dominant humour of dramatic theory, in the Theophrastian character, and elsewhere . . .” (210). Or take Benjamin Boyce: “The farther one investigates Pope’s use of the idea of a ruling passion, the less significant it appears to be” (108). Boyce here suggests that we should not overestimate the idea of “ruling passion” in the context of Pope’s *oeuvre*, because Pope himself did not hold it too seriously (110). From a somewhat different perspective, Maynard Mack argues that we could find the proper place and meaning of the concept when we take into consideration the other great ideas and motives of Pope’s poems. Thus, Maynard Mack treats “ruling passion” in connection with the Popean theory of the divine providence in *An Essay on Man*.<sup>4</sup> In this study, I focus on the aspects of the term that connect it with a somewhat less manifest though serious dilemma, namely the problem of human character. In this respect, Pope could rely on a more or less well-defined tradition, on that of character sketches.<sup>5</sup>

---

The reasoning human mind—so goes the fideist argument—is not capable of conceiving the essence or attributes of God. The authority of some classical moralists, such as Seneca, Cicero, Epictetus, or Epicurus, who in their theories built heavily on the autonomy of will and the understanding capacity of reason, started to crumble, thanks partly to a revival of sceptical pyrrhonism. The philosophy and psychology of scientific empiricism from Bacon to Locke criticised the rationalistic systems of Descartes, Malebranche, or Hobbes. For the first, second, and third points, see Popkin.

4 “God’s direction and supervision of ruling passion is therefore a phase of Pope’s theodicy as well as of his ethics” (Mack 211).

5 There is a difference between character writing and literary *portraits*. Usually we consider the portrait as the description of a single person, while character writing as a depiction of a type of person.

The origin of character writing or character sketches is obviously the *Characters* of the Greek Theophrastus. While the genre was not popular in the Middle Ages, it was revitalised by French and English authors at the end of the Renaissance as a short prosaic description of a specific human type, mostly incarnations of vices or virtues. The Greek term “χαρακτήρ” (*kharaktēr*) means an engraved mark and, in the case of Theophrastus’ *Characters*, it should be understood in a psychological-rhetorical manner. The pieces of Theophrastus always begin with a short definition of a given type, which is followed by a list of the typical actions and sayings of this character. So, Theophrastus suggests that we can identify certain characters when we know their customary expressions, especially oral expressions. It is remarkable that in English instances of the genre, for example, in Joseph Hall’s *Characters of Virtues and Vices* or John Earle’s *Microcosmography*, this rhetorical focus shifts to the depiction of actions predominantly. In his *Les Caractères*, the most well-known artist of this genre, the French La Bruyère transforms neutral description into an aphoristic, satiric form.

The variants of “character writing” and its revitalisation in the mid-seventeenth century induced speculations about the proper means and rules of the genre. Certainly, these speculations could not remain intact from the flourishing new psychology, namely the theory of passions of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, or Hutcheson. It is from this perspective that we can understand the project of Henry Gally, who in his 1725 *A Critical Essay on Characteristic-Writings*, criticising La Bruyère’s irregular method, writes that “[t]he under Passions may, by their various Operations, cause some Diversity in the Colour and Complexion of the Whole, but ’tis the Master-Passion which must determine the Character” (34). There are two demands manifested in this quotation: firstly, the demand of the proper portrayal of a dramatic or fictive persona; and secondly, the accurate presentation of a human person’s psychological constitution. At this moment, the literary and scientific demands intersect in a single genre, and the phrase “master-passion” has a central role in this. According to Gally, an artist cannot present the proper outline of a character

---

When we read Pope’s poems, we can find wonderful satirical portraits of contemporaries and also numerous excellent generalisations of human behaviour. Again and again, it is quite difficult to categorise this or that section of a poem. It would be very interesting indeed to collect and categorise the Popean character sketches and portrayals, but in this study the aim is not the investigation of various forms of Popean character writing but the delineation of a specific problem, namely the questions related to the term “ruling passion.”

if he or she is not able to detect the psychologically determinable “master-passion” underneath the accidental motives of an actual or fictitious individual. So, in Gally’s “master-passion,” we have the antecedent of the Popean “ruling passion.” But we should also notice an important difference: in the case of Pope, instead of speaking about an explicit scientific demand, we should speak about a less consistent, although more comprehensive sceptical attitude.

The subtitles of the two epistles in which Pope explicitly deals with the psychology of human characters are *Of the knowledge and characters of men* and *Of the characters of women*. In the second epistle, *Of the characters of women*, Pope touches on an important issue concerning the roles of women in contemporary society, but there is only marginal space for the concept of “ruling passion.” In a short section of the poem, Pope presents his demeaning opinion about women:

In men various ruling passions find;  
In women two almost divide the kind;  
Those, only fixed, they first or last obey,  
The love of pleasure and the love of sway. (207–210)

Beside these lines, there are no other occurrences or even references to the term “ruling passion” in this poem.

The most vigorous theory of “ruling passion” emerges in the first epistle, *Of the knowledge and characters of men*, addressed to Sir Richard Temple. The compound, “characters of men” is connected here to the tradition of character writing. Character writing has common tenets with the writing of satires and it poses the very problems which manifest themselves through Pope’s sceptical attitude. We have three problems that come together in Pope’s satirical epistle. The first is a rhetorical one: how can we portray single persons who stand as examples of types of persons, or, conversely, how can we portray specific characters who resemble real persons? The second question is theoretical: how can we know other individuals and ourselves? The third is moral: is there any constant motive of the will that can be an effective basis for morality? All these questions are relevant to the conception of “ruling passion.”

We find hardly any paradigmatic character sketches in Pope’s *oeuvre*. Certainly, there are portrayals of characters in his satires, but he tends to characterise specific individuals. So, the *Epistle to Lord Cobham* is a mixture of an artistic theory of characters and a satirical portrayal of actual people. The general argument

## FROM CHARACTER TO NATURE

of the epistle was obviously influenced by Montaigne's sceptical masterpiece, entitled *Of the inconsistency of our actions*. Pope, following Montaigne's meditations, doubts whether there are any means to grasp the essential motives of human nature. We cannot learn it from books or from "some general maxims" (219). We cannot learn it from observing other people, and—which is a more serious problem—we cannot learn it from inspecting ourselves: "That each from other differs, first confess; / Next, that he varies from himself no less" (174–176). There is no room for strict speculations of moral philosophy. The ruling principles of reason—as we will also see in the case of Hume—have little impact on the real motives of a human individual:

On human actions reason though you can,  
It may be reason, but it is not man:  
His principle of action once explore,  
That instant 'tis his principle no more. (25–28)

Or later: "In vain the sage, with retrospective eye, / Would from the apparent *what*, conclude the *why*" (99–100, emphasis added). Neither education nor customary behaviour can explicitly show us a person's inward reality. Pope answers to this seemingly insoluble riddle that there is a "ruling passion" beneath the surface of human phenomena. When this clue is once found, it unravels all the rest: "Search the Ruling Passion: there, alone, / The wild are constant, and the cunning known; / The fool consistent, and the false sincere" (174–176). In the epistle, Pope mentions some living examples of this passion. One example is the Duke of Wharton, whose ruling passion is the lust for praise; another is Sir Charles Duncombe, whose ruling passion is the lust for property.

There is another important peculiarity of a "ruling passion" that Pope emphasises in *An Essay on Man*: in a way that might remind us of the Freudian death drive, not only does it last until death, in some cases, it impels us despite a deadly threat:

As man, perhaps, the moment of his breath  
Receives the lurking principle of death;  
.....  
Through life 'tis follow'd, even at life's expense. (133–134; 171)

While we can only suppose the exact relation of reason and "ruling passion" in the *Moral Essays*, in the *Essay on Man*, there is an explicit line of thought.

According to this, reason cannot control the “ruling passion,” and in unfortunate cases it even makes it worse. “Reason itself but gives it edge and power; / As Heaven’s blest beam turns vinegar more sour” (147–148). Furthermore, there is a characteristic relation between this master passion and minor passions: the master passion always swallows other minor passions.

It is quite obvious that in the *Essay on Man*, this conception of “ruling passion” is more consolidated and integrated than in the first *Epistle*. After reading the *Moral Essays*, we could easily conclude that for Pope, a “ruling passion” is a disaster or fate of nature. Human persons reveal consistency only through following their ambivalent inclinations and vices. Contrary to this, in the *Essay on Man* Pope recommends that we should respect our “ruling passion” not as an enemy but rather as a friend. In that case, reason has the potential not just to strengthen but to refine the “ruling passion,” and we also realise that this very passion is the hidden energy of virtues: “The surest virtues thus from passions shoot, / Wild Nature’s vigour working at the root” (183–184). This means that the appearance of a “ruling passion” is not a sign of a demonic fate of human lives, a blind spot among our basic motives, but a sign of nature’s true energy in human psychophysiology. Furthermore, in the theodicy of *An Essay on Man*, this force of nature is the manifestation of the Almighty’s divine plan. The conclusion could be that in his *Moral Essays*, Pope exploited the subversive, satirical potential of “ruling passion,” showing how ridiculous human striving can be, and how easily we can uncover a certain person’s hypocrisy and dullness, whereas in the *Essay on Man*, focusing upon the critique of “reason’s pride,” Pope built a somewhat ambivalent but positive system of relations between man, nature, and God.<sup>6</sup> What is shared by the two works is the recognition of the predominance of irrational motives of human behaviour, and the contradictory, sometimes chaotic forces influencing the will.

## II

Pope’s notion of the “ruling passion” may have been an influence on Hume’s idea

---

6 I say “somewhat ambivalent,” because it is clear that the philosophical argument of *An Essay on Man* is in many respects incoherent. For example, one of the most important theses of the poem is that man should confine his range of interests only upon himself, because spheres beyond the human are unknowable. Indeed, the whole perspective of the poem contradicts this thesis, because it is a beyond-human, cosmic—so to say—divine perspective.

of a “predominant inclination.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike Pope, Hume did not articulate an explicit theory of “predominant inclination” or of “ruling passion.” He uses the former term two times in his autobiographical essay, “My Own Life.” In this essay, Hume wrote that throughout his life there was “a passion for literature, which has been the *ruling passion* of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments” (par. 3, emphasis added), and at the end of the essay, he asserts that “[e]ven my love of literary fame, my *ruling passion*, never soured my temper . . .” (par. 21, emphasis added). These sections convey the impression that Hume did not use the term in its own right, as an indication of a theory, but utilised it in drawing his own character. But in his earlier, philosophical writings, Hume used the phrase “predominant inclination” in a somewhat similar meaning as Pope had used his term. As I show in the following sections, the usage of the phrase “predominant inclination” for Hume signals the emergence of important questions regarding the character of philosophers, the activity of philosophy, and the relation between passions and reason in human nature. Here we could find the scepticism which is in some respect similar to that of Pope.

In his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in connection with his radical empiricist method, Hume inverts traditional dualism: instead of guaranteeing or legitimating the knowability of things, the faculty of reason must confine its machinations to probabilistic propositions about facts of nature. In Hume’s opinion, the privilege called “knowledge” must abandon its supposed certainty and its desperately needed logical necessity, and transform itself to “belief.” Hume, following Locke and at the same time radicalising his empiricist method, attempted to trace back every working of the mind to its empirical origin. So, Hume states, there is not a single idea in the mind that has not been a sensuous impression before, which means that impressions always have priority to ideas (*Treatise* 7–9). Presumably the most fundamental consequence of this genealogy of mind is the impossibility of demonstrating *a priori* principles, as well as the impossibility of the basic principle of reason, namely the necessary causal inference. Hume does not claim that we should not speak about cause and effect, but demonstrates that there is no necessary connection between them. The connection between cause and effect is not an absolute necessity but an empirical probability, which means that it is based on customary association. We do not infer from cause to effect logically, but we believe in this connection through

---

7 I have not found any clear indication of direct influence, although if we consider the popularity of Pope’s *An Essay on Man* immediately after its release in 1733, we have a reason to suppose that it had an impact on Hume.



the affirmation of repeated cases. Naturally, in Hume we are not dealing with just any old “belief.” As a definite principle of the connection between impressions and ideas, and after that, between ideas and ideas, it is a fundamental presupposition of any meaningful human experience. The most important thing to note here is that belief is not a logical but a sensitive relation between impressions and ideas: “. . . belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures” (123). In this perspective, the ontological status of reality itself gets a sensitive and even emotional character. We *believe* that something is real when we *feel* that the idea of that impression is strong enough in comparison to other ideas: “An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: and this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or *firmness*, or steadiness” (68).<sup>8</sup>

This is the epistemological framework that Hume elaborates in the first chapters of the *Treatise*, before moving on to other topics, to the passions and morality. In the chapters called *Of liberty and necessity* and *Of the influencing motives of the will*, Hume argues that the will itself is not a metaphysically autonomous agency of reason but an impression of a specific working of the mind (257–268). In addition, Hume states that this “working” is neither initiated nor determined by reason. The agents with determining efficacy here are the emotions, passions, and inclinations of the mind. Hence the famous statement: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (266).

This is the framework for Hume’s thinking about the passions and this is also where we should try to insert the phrase “predominant inclination.” As I have already pointed out, there is no hint of a systematic theory of “predominant inclination” in Hume’s works. In the *Treatise*, the phrase appears only once, in the chapter called *Of the causes of the violent passions* (268). In this case, the term

---

8 This statement is, of course, an oversimplification of Hume’s argument, but I think it serves perfectly the purpose of this study. We could say that Hume did not really make such a straightforward proposition concerning the ontological status of reality. His account has two aspects. The first is the basic distinction between ideas and impressions. According to Hume, in most cases we can easily differentiate between ideas and impressions, and we feel impressions more strongly than ideas. Surely, this distinction is in itself not a guarantee of the reliability of the outside reality at all. Hence, we have the second aspect: at the end of the first book of *Treatise*, Hume denies all philosophical arguments intended to prove the permanent existence of outside reality (121–164). What subsists for Hume despite this scepticism is an ordinary inclination or instinct of reality. We could say with Freud—a reality principle. These two aspects motivate the statement above.

“predominant inclination” designates an inclination, which “became a settled principle of action” (268). It is important to note here that, in connection with the ideas on the fallibility of reason, Hume states that reason cannot govern the human will, and the various passions have a much more significant role in human behaviour. Hume differentiates between violent and calm passions, and writes that we should not call calm passions weak, but, on the contrary, they are calm because they basically determine our whole life, and we are not even aware of them. In this sense, this “predominant inclination” can be a flow of calm passion, without sensible agitation, yet it has the strongest effect on our actions.

In the *Treatise*, besides “predominant inclination,” Hume uses the terms “predominant passion,” “prevailing affection,” and “prevailing passion” to designate the passion which assimilates other minor passions into itself. These are only relative terms, designating passions which overrun the others in a given moment. “It is a remarkable property of human nature, that any emotion, which attends a passion, is easily converted into it...” (269). Although human persons can simultaneously possess or can be possessed by many different emotions, these do not extinguish each other, but at that given moment fuse into a dominant passion and strengthen it. As we have seen, the Popean “ruling passion” had this inherent characteristic, and it is also an important feature of the Humean “predominant inclination.”

There is a more explicit usage of the term in the essay entitled “The Sceptic.” Hume wrote this essay at the time of finishing his *Treatise*, along with other three essays, namely “The Epicurean,” “The Stoic,” and “The Platonist.” The questions in these essays are not so much theoretical as practical ones about the methods and perspectives of good life (Immerwahr 307–327). The persona of “The Sceptic” starts with criticising “the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects” (Hume, *Essays* 95). One of the main arguments against philosophers is that when they speak about good life, they take *their own* perspectives and desires of life as fundamental for every other person. And that is a serious mistake.<sup>9</sup> As Hume writes:

In that case they are led astray, not only by the narrowness of their understanding, but by that also of their passions. Almost every one has a predominant inclination, to which his other desires and affections submit, and which governs him, though, perhaps, with some intervals, through the whole course of his life. (*Essays* 95)

---

<sup>9</sup> The question which essay represents the standpoint of Hume is an interesting one; again, see Immerwahr (307–327).

We can see here that the two meanings of the term, which in the *Treatise* were still vaguely distributed between different signifiers, now unite: a ruling inclination which subordinates to itself the other minor inclinations and a “predominant inclination” that governs someone through his or her whole life.

The important thing is that a criticism of dogmatising philosophy, present throughout the essays, becomes most acute and elaborate in “The Sceptic.” There are two other complaints in this essay against the one-sidedness of the thinking activity of philosophers. The first is that their abstract argumentation is so remote from the life of ordinary passions that these argumentations would be completely artificial and useless. The second is that when these argumentations accidentally succeed, they extinguish not only the harmful passions but also the benevolent ones. What we need here, according to the sceptic, is a sort of economy between the passions and reasoning. We do need reasoning in order to expose our latent inclinations, not to strengthen but to moderate them. But we do need a capability of abandoning reason when its processes are overactive, strengthening only pride and imperiousness.

We can observe the same economy in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which—in Hume’s intention—is a concise version of the *Treatise*. In it, Hume writes:

The passion for philosophy . . . seems liable to this inconvenience, that, though it aims at the correction of our manners, and extirpation of our vices, it may only serve, by imprudent management, to foster a predominant inclination, and push the mind, with more determined resolution, towards that side which already *draws* too much, by the bias and propensity of the natural temper. (*Enquiry* 40)

We cannot single out a clear definition of “predominant inclination” in this passage either. However, shortly after this part, Hume speaks about a “more refined system of selfishness.” So, it can easily happen, according to Hume, that the morality of the dogmatic philosopher, instead of being refined and harmonised through the practice of philosophical reasoning, hardens into an unconscious “predominant inclination,” which could even be plain selfishness. As a matter of fact, in “The Sceptic” and in the *Enquiry*, Hume draws the outlines of the character of a false philosopher. This philosopher aims at reforming the ordinary customs and superstitions of mankind, but he is not aware of his “superstition” regarding the capability of his own reason. The false philosopher will develop a form of pride of his reasoning capacity, and that will eventually be a hypocrisy, because the philosopher certainly cannot achieve a complete reformation of human customs.

## FROM CHARACTER TO NATURE

What is more, it will be hypocrisy against himself, because the philosopher, seemingly following just the principles of his own pure reason, actually relies on an unconscious motive of his character, namely a “predominant inclination,” and just strengthens it (Livingston 23–35).

We should conclude that in the works of Hume, “predominant inclination” is an irrational, very effective passion or inclination that has a leading role in the whole course of an individual’s life. It is not sure whether it is—to use Humean terminology—a direct passion like grief, fear, desire, or an indirect passion like pride or humility. We do not know whether it is a single passion, the ruling and typical passion of an individual, like selfishness, or whether there are many different predominant inclinations within one person. It is also possible that a “predominant inclination” is more like a natural temper, like in Galen’s humour theory. It is quite clear, however, that there is a relationship between the problem of “predominant inclination” and the sceptical attitude of philosophy. As we have already seen, this sceptical attitude, according to Hume, calls for a moderate economy of the soul. We call into question the rigid principles of metaphysics, firstly, in order to disclose the passion of pride beneath the abstract argumentation, and secondly, in order to relate more flexibly to the flow of our own human nature. This relationship involves a further step, namely the suspension of doubt when it reaches an exaggerated scale and a return to the customs and natural inclinations of everyday life. As Hume summarises in the *Treatise*: “A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them” (273).

### III

In the sceptical attitude of the spirit of the eighteenth century, and by the unsettlement of the traditional basis of virtues, there emerges the ethical and psychological problem of the consistency of human behaviour and the consistency of the self of an individual. The emergence of the phrases “ruling passion” and “predominant inclination” signals this need of a generalising yet exact terminology concerning humanlike behaviour. The construction of new moral systems that replace the old ones is a common method, especially when we are dealing with systems of seventeenth-eighteenth-century philosophy. Before Pope and Hume, Thomas Hobbes was perhaps the most radical figure in this revision of morality.

Hobbes tried to develop a universally valid system to understand the psychological motives of human individuals. His key terms were the partly rational, partly instinctual “self-interest,” and the emotion of fear.<sup>10</sup> The Popean and Humean act of thinking will be more sceptical, and the problem will be more complex than to coerce it into a rationalistic system. In Pope’s satires, we are confronted with the question: what makes the *essential difference* between man and man if we consider the rank of the capabilities of reason only after the rank of affections and passions? This question is naturally connected to the artistic challenges of expressing and delineating different emotions and feelings through character sketches (see Rogerson 68–94). In Hume’s treatises and essays, there is a detailed analysis of human customs, reasoning, and passions—an analysis that eventually involves the character of the philosopher and the very act of philosophising. It concludes that it is a false philosophy that singles out just one or two homogeneous motives of human nature and takes them as universally valid. In these contexts, the “predominant inclination” will designate a central passion of the soul which can be different from individual to individual, but which can determine and motivate the whole life of a person.

It is important to note here that, when we compare the theories of Hume and Pope, we should not treat them as closely similar; rather, we should conceive of them as analogous. This distinction is necessary because there are considerable differences concerning the resolution of scepticism. When Hume offers us a moderate practice of meditation, an inward refinement and retirement to natural instincts, Pope offers us a rhetorical, satirical method, first to expose the vices, showing the chaos of human activity, then to rely on a theodicy in which chaos is but the surface of nature’s divine, pre-stabilised order.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these Humean and Popean terms is their dark aura of the irrational. They demonstrate the scepticism through which the great paradigm of enlightenment, the reformation of cognition, turns upon itself and reveals its irrational basis. In Cassirer’s view, there is a steady inclination to treat the aspirations of eighteenth-century Enlightenment from the simple perspectives of, for example, the rising freedom and dignity of humanity or the autonomy

---

10 The question whether in human nature the sociable instincts or the instincts of self-interest play the dominant role had central importance in the first half of the eighteenth century. We encounter this very dilemma when we read the sentences of the introduction to *An Essay on Man*, where Pope tried to “[steer] betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite” (Pope, “The Design”).

## FROM CHARACTER TO NATURE

of the reasoning mind (93–134).<sup>11</sup> Or take one of the epithets of the eighteenth century, the “century of philosophy”: the Popean and Humean disbelief in the faculties of reason discredit not only the almightiness of philosophy but also the philosopher as a character. This means that philosophising and theorising in Pope’s satires and in Hume’s philosophy are not matters of choosing between different theoretical doctrines. Rather, philosophising is a matter of appropriate psychological character, inclination, and passion. The scepticism that follows from this position is far from being a sort of nihilism or cynicism. Disbelief in reason opens up the ways of nature.

### WORKS CITED

- Aldington, Richard, ed. *A Book of Characters from Theophrastus; Joseph Hall, Sir Thomas Overbury, Nicolas Breton, John Earle, Thomas Fuller, and Other English Authors; Jean de La Bruyère, Vauvenargues, and Other French Authors*. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1924.
- Bowley, Martin Watson. “Character Sketches.” In *Encyclopedia of The Essay*. Ed. Chevalier, Tracy. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, 353–355.
- . “Characters by Theophrastus.” In *Encyclopedia of The Essay*. Ed. Chevalier, Tracy. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, 355–358.
- Boyce, Benjamin. *The Character Sketches in Pope’s Poems*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1962.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Gally, Henry. *A Critical Essay on Characteristic-Writings (1725)*. Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, 1952.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Millican, Peter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . “My Own Life.” *Electronic Texts*. Ed. Lynch, Jack. Rutgers University, n. d. Web. 6 Oct 2017.
- . *Selected Essays*. Ed. Copley, Stephen, and Andrew Edgar. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

---

11 MacLean provides a great example of this somewhat misleading perspective when he writes with a kind of indignation that “[n]o aspect of Eighteenth Century thought is so astonishing as the popularity of this antirational conception of ruling passions which thus sets the intellect aside to leave us at the mercy of our passions” (47).

## DÁNIEL TAKÁCS

- . *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Eds. Norton, David Fate, and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Immerwahr, John. “Hume’s Essays on Happiness.” *Hume Studies* 15.2 (1989): 307–327.
- Livingston, Donald W. *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume’s Pathology of Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Mack, Maynard. “Introduction to *An Essay on Man*.” In *Collected in Himself: Essays Critical, Biographical and Bibliographical on Pope and Some of his Contemporaries*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982. 197–260.
- MacLean, Kenneth. *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936.
- Parker, Fred. *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Pope, Alexander. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Dobrée, Bonamy. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1983.
- . “The Design.” In *An Essay on Man—Moral Essays and Satires*. Ed. Morely, Henry. London, Paris, and Melbourne: Cassel & Company, 1891. Project Gutenberg. 20 Aug 2007. Web. 6 Oct 2017.
- Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. Assen: Van Gorkum, 1960.
- Rogerson, Brewster. “The Art of Painting the Passions.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14.1 (1953): 68–94.
- Theophrastus. *Characters*. Ed. Diggle, James. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dániel Takács is a PhD candidate at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Faculty of Philosophy and Aesthetics. His research focusses on the literary genre of satire, the theories of satire, philosophy of art in the twentieth century—especially the philosophy and aesthetics of Georg Lukács—and literary theories.