

## **ABOUT RECASTING HUME: A DEFENSE OF INTERPRETATIVE PLURALISM**

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### **1 Introduction**

In what follows, I will focus on the last part of the book *Recasting Hume and Early Modern Philosophy* entitled V. “Irreligion and the Unity of Hume’s Thought”<sup>1</sup>.

I proceed in two steps. Firstly, I reappraise some of the historiographical and methodological justifications that justify, according to Paul Russell, the idea that speculative atheism or the “irreligious dimension” of the Radical Enlightenment is *in fine* the general unifying principle of Hume’s philosophy. Secondly, I draw some consequences to test this hypothesis.

This will then lead me to claim the possibility of *an interpretative pluralism* which, in my opinion, allows for all the complexity and the changing character of the relations involving the heritages and contemporary interpretations of David Hume’s work<sup>2</sup>.

### **2 The methodological requirement of doctrinal unity in Hume’s philosophy**

2.1 The starting point of Paul Russell’s analysis rests on the methodological postulate according to which Hume’s philosophical thought gains in intelligibility and coherence as soon as it is understood in its unity and its systematicity.

This bias towards unity is particularly fruitful and it allows him, obviously, to draw the contours of Hume’s philosophical thought in this modern era of revolutions<sup>3</sup>. But its application remains delicate. To Q. Skinner<sup>4</sup>, there lies a risk of transforming a methodological regulating principle - the search for coherence - into a mythological construction of an ontological type: a dogmatic affirmation of the reality of the unity of the work. It is thus a question of not confusing the interpretative *model* of the work with the work itself.

The postulate of coherence and unity of the work amounts to controlling the interpretative work of the historian and/or the philosopher. This means, by epistemological charity<sup>5</sup>, to recognize that for an author, the elaboration of a point of view and a consistent reasoning always implies to submit him or her (self) to the

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<sup>1</sup> RH, V, p. 405-s.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Frederic Herrmann who carefully proofread my English.

<sup>3</sup> This expression “of the revolutions” refers not only to the century of the civil wars and the “Glorious Revolution” but also to the complex context of the scientific revolutions that marked the transition from the 17th to the 18th century.

<sup>4</sup> Skinner Q., *Visions of Politics. Regarding Method*, Cambridge, 2002, Cambridge University Press, 4. “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, p. 54-s.; especially on p. 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Which refers, here, to the anthropological idea of a community of epistemological values that define, since the early modern era at least, the construction of a thought or an idea ...

epistemic values of coherence, relevance, non contradiction, etc. The fact remains that the effective reality of such coherence and unity, especially when they are re-established *post festum* as it is the case with the historian of philosophy, supposes a certain temporal continuity or, more accurately, a form of neutralization of the effects of time on the development of thought. Classically, two manners of reading a work are confronted here: a diachronic approach which primarily views thought as being inscribed and constituted within a historical movement, whereby the transformation of 'contexts' and the author's 'intentions' take empirical precedence over the requirement of coherence and unity; and a synchronic approach, which privileges the systematic reconstruction of thought according to the "order of reasons"<sup>6</sup>, which pushes its historical genesis into the background, which considers in a different way the relationships between author and text or thought.

The difficulty is then in the way to hold the tension between these two requirements which, though they are not contradictory<sup>7</sup>, are however not interchangeable. Paul Russell's interpretation of Hume takes into account these difficulties and returns to the complex definition of the concepts of inheritance and interpretation.

The historian of philosophy who, *today*, intends to restore the meaning of Hume's philosophical work in a different way, cannot ignore the weight that interpretative legacies exert on the current reading of his work. His reading will be determined by sure-footed previous readings, and thus by the weight of these legacies. Any new interpretation is immediately inscribed within the long history of interpretations whose heritage<sup>8</sup> crystallizes and solidifies the perspectives and possibilities.

This raises the question of interpretative innovation or of the possibility of disruption in the history of interpretations. Paul Russell aims to take into account the heritage and at the same time seeks, perhaps not to break entirely from it, but to establish some distance from it. What then is the core of his interpretation? And in what ways does it make Hume's work more intelligible?

I will not seek, in this article, to summarize Paul Russell's patient and meticulous work, a work that he has progressively developed throughout his publications<sup>9</sup>. I will limit myself to generalities, those he himself evokes in Part Five of *Recasting Hume* and which are sufficient, in my opinion, to highlight the fruitfulness of his approach and, at the same time, to suggest other avenues of reflection on the work of the historian of philosophy when he/she is interested in Hume's philosophy.

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<sup>6</sup> To use here an expression that I borrow from Martial Guéroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, 2 tomes, Paris, 1953 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Aubier, Col. "Analyse et raisons".

<sup>7</sup> For any work is inevitably worked, as soon as it is realized in time - that of its genesis and its writing - by this vital tension between diachrony and synchrony.

<sup>8</sup> We can recall here the classical distinction, with regard to Descartes, between Martial Guéroult who, in *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* [*Op. cit.*] favours the systematic reconstruction of the work and Ferdinand Alquie who, in *La découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes* [Paris, 1950, Puf], favoured the point of view of the historical genesis of Descartes' thought. The "system" is not "history", even if the two coexist.

<sup>8</sup> Here, for reasons of convenience, I do not distinguish between inheritance - generic singular - and inheritances.

<sup>9</sup> Among other publications, *The Riddle of Hume Treatise. Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion*, Oxford, 2008, Oxford University Press; *The Oxford Handbook of Hume* [Paul Russell ed.], Oxford, 2020, Oxford University Press.

According to Paul Russell, two lines of interpretation have mainly guided the work of reading Hume's philosophy until today. And this, almost since its first reception<sup>10</sup>.

The first one is what we now call the theory of knowledge. It places Hume in the tradition of "British empiricism" and makes him its third representative, after John Locke and George Berkeley. The second one, which is rooted in the innovative work of N. Kemp Smith<sup>11</sup>, makes naturalism one of the dimensions of Humean philosophy that makes it possible to overcome the tension between skepticism and the construction of the new "science of man". It also allows us to reconsider some of Hume's sources of inspiration on the historiographical level: not only the Locke-Berkeley filiation, but also the tradition of moral sentimentalism, mainly but not exclusively Hutcheson. This allows us to give a decisive place to the moral dimension of his thought.

2.2 If we accept empiricist principles then the philosopher's attention will focus on the question of the "theory of ideas"<sup>12</sup> and on the way in which the possible resolution of the problem of the foundations of knowledge comes up against Hume's skeptical claim. To situate the latter in British empiricism is thus to put forward the tension, which we have to delimit and understand regarding its consequences, between the empiricist conception of knowledge and the skeptical attitude of the philosopher<sup>13</sup>. It is thus to operate a certain choice or to adopt *a certain interpretative point of view* that we can, here, define as epistemological.

Like any point of view, its definition entails the demarcation between what is made visible and what is made invisible. I agree with Paul Russell: the point of view of the theory of knowledge has the effect of retaining only one part of Hume's work - mainly *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-1740] and the *Enquiry into Human Understanding* [1748]<sup>14</sup>. The rest of the work appears as a rather heterogeneous body whose meaning, when taken into account, is mainly determined by the elucidation of this original tension. According to Paul Russell, such an interpretative point of view, which is the main basis of this first line of interpretation is not without harmful consequences for a thorough understanding of the work.

The whole historiographical and philosophical difficulty of the interpretative attitude claimed by Paul Russell is that it has to distance itself from what has contributed to Hume's "posterity"<sup>15</sup>. This posterity can be seen in the subsequent receptions and criticisms of this philosophy, which, in a way, legitimize this heritage.

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<sup>10</sup> By this I mean the way some of his contemporaries themselves read and criticized his work. The most convincing example is that of Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* [1764] and James Beattie, *An Essay on the Immutability of Truth* [1770]. See RH, V, C.15, fn 5 p. 409.

<sup>11</sup> Norbert Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume, A critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines*, London 1941, Macmillan; reedition with a new Introduction of Don Garrett, Palgrave, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> RH, V, C.15, p. 409-s.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Russell shows in detail in Chapter 16 how the problem of the relation between two forms of skeptical attitudes can be solved: that of moderate or "Academic" and that of the "outraged" or "Pyrrhonian". This restraint would find, according to him, in the "irreligious hypothesis", the way to a correct interpretation allowing to understand the negative or, in a certain sense, regulating function of the outraged skepticism. See on all these points RH, V, C.16, "Irreligion and the Riddle's Solution: The Core Features", p. 435-s.

<sup>14</sup> And even when, for example, the *Dialogues on Natural Religion* [1779] are taken into account, it is possibly only on the epistemological and theory-of-knowledge level: notably around the problem of analogy.

<sup>15</sup> I will not take up here the difficult question of the "posterity" of a work and of the methodological conditions in which it is possible to give an account of it through the receptions and the readings which are made later. In France, Pierre-François Moreau has done substantial work on the reception of Spinoza and Descartes in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some references among others: *Spinoza au XIXe siècle*, André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, Jean Salem eds, Paris, 2008, Éditions de La Sorbonne; but also "Ajourner

Paul Russell is clearly aware of this, and states that: “we can hardly fail to acknowledge that the work done on this basis [the British Empiricism’s legacy which “seriously distorts and misrepresents Hume’s philosophy”] has itself proved to be of considerable value and interest. The irony here may be that misinterpretation and distortion of Hume’s core concerns and historical situation has served us well—bringing us, among other notable contributions, nothing less than Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. No responsible historian of philosophy will want to deny either that this is indeed a genuine aspect of Hume’s philosophical legacy”<sup>16</sup>.

These later interpretations of Hume’s work, which give a true historical and philosophical meaning to *this* legacy, nevertheless run up against the methodological pitfall of “that *precision* and *accuracy* interpretation”<sup>17</sup> according to Paul Russell.

If, therefore, it is not a matter of questioning the effectiveness of such a posterity<sup>18</sup> or such a heritage, the fact remains, still according to Paul Russell, that this tradition of reading is nourished by a *partial point of view* which abandons, in a way, the methodological requirement of restoring the coherence and the unity of the work. Thus, most often, priority is given to Book I – *Of the Understanding* - over Books II – *Of the Passions* - and III – *Of Morals* - of the *Treatise*; priority is given to the first *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748] - over the second *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751]<sup>19</sup>.

As fruitful as this interpretative legacy of British empiricism is, it remains debatable and must still be discussed by the historian of philosophy. However, it is not the second interpretative direction, that of naturalism, which can significantly modify this first diagnosis.

2.3 For in this first tradition of reading Hume, the tension between skepticism and the possibility of true knowledge remains a source of instability and, often, the skeptical dimension prevails over the principles of his empiricism.

It is to N. Kemp Smith’s credit, as Paul Russell<sup>20</sup> reminds us, that he innovated and broke, so to speak, with this way of formulating the problem by putting forward the naturalistic dimension of his philosophy. This naturalism shifts the terms of the previous equation and renews in depth the way to read not only his theory of knowledge but also and in equal measure his moral theory.

The double advantage of this reading, which was to start another tradition of interpretations of Hume’s work, is the following: on the one hand, this reading shows that Hume gives an anthropological answer to the excesses of skepticism, in order to make it a *methodological* skepticism - the nature of man, in its affective and

Pontologie’ Le cartésianisme relu par Victor Cousin” in Delphine Antoine Mahu (ed.): *Qu’est-ce qu’être cartésien?*, Lyon, ENS-Éditions, 2013. Not to mention the multiple works nourished by Hans-Robert Jauss’s seminal study, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* [(1967) 1982].

<sup>16</sup> RH, V, C.15, p. 422-423.

<sup>17</sup> RH, V, C.15, p. 408; emphasized by PR.

<sup>18</sup> A posterity that we owe, in part, to Th. Reid, J. Beattie [fn-9], that culminates firstly with E. Kant, that we find in John Stuart Mill, then in the Logical Empiricists, etc. A posterity that has a really significant impact on the crystallization of this whole tradition of readings of Hume whose effects are still felt today.

<sup>19</sup> It also fails to take into consideration the importance of the author’s words who, after the failure of the *Treatise* – see the warning to the reader that precedes the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* - envisaged building his literary work differently and, to do so, developed new writing strategies - in particular through the “essay”. Some commentators, notably French, go so far as to defend the thesis that it is important to take Hume’s recommendation literally and to put the *Treatise* aside. See Michel Malherbe, “Introduction” to David Hume, *Essais et Traités sur plusieurs sujets*. I. *Essais Moraux Politiques et Littéraires, Première Partie*, Paris, 2000, Vrin, p. 11-52.

<sup>20</sup> RH, V, C15, p. 413-s.

passionate dimensions, comes to channel and subdue "reason", that is to say to contain it in its deleterious effects that do not fail to produce the radicalization of doubt<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, this valorization of the *aesthesis* allows to give back all its importance to the aesthetic and moral questions and, consequently, to propose a more balanced reading of the three Books of the *Treatise of Human Nature* as well as of the two *Enquiries*.

With this second line of reading, or naturalistic tradition, with and since N. Kemp Smith, the problem of knowledge is reappraised in a larger whole that legitimately includes moral and political questions insofar as they are positively - and no longer residually - implied in the analysis of all the consequences of Humean naturalism<sup>22</sup>.

This complexification of the heritage now gravitates around a constellation of problems structured by this double orientation: the tension between skepticism and empiricism, the naturalistic requalification of the Humean approach. This constellation forms the basis on which, even today, we should situate the essential work of commentary on David Hume's philosophy.

The fact remains that, according to Paul Russell, this current commentary, as diverse as it is, still does not satisfy the methodological requirement of unity<sup>23</sup> of doctrine and that, for this reason, despite its profusion and richness remains unsatisfactory.

This is the reason why this requirement is still to be met, because, says Paul Russell, "Neither the classical skeptical nor naturalistic interpretations provide convincing answers to this question about the unity of Hume's project in the *Treatise*"<sup>24</sup>. Paul Russell's work as a commentator can hence be seen as an effort to meet this requirement in order to achieve gains in intelligibility which will prove useful to the understanding of Hume's work.

In what follows, I would first like to discuss the way in which Paul Russell intends to respond to this methodological requirement of the search for unity and coherence of the work, *i.e.* to describe how the hypothesis of the irreligious dimension of Hume's philosophy appears to be *a reconstructive principle* of this unity [Part II].

Then, I would like to show that we can use this methodological principle in *another way* by avoiding giving to the concept of unity or totality too strong an ontological density<sup>25</sup>; that is to say by making this methodological requirement work as *a regulating principle of critical reading*. To do this, I will start from two examples, that of certain interpretations of the Humean problem of "personal identity" and that of the relationship of his philosophy to history.

These two examples will allow me to reformulate the methodological requirement of the search for unity from a deflationary reading of the concept of unity and coherence which then authorizes *a certain pluralism* of interpretations [Part III].

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<sup>21</sup> THN, I, 4, 7 "Conclusion of this Book", p. 171-s.

<sup>22</sup> For an example quite characteristic of this enlargement in English commentary see Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, Cambridge, 1975, Cambridge University Press; and in French commentary, Didier Deleule, *Hume et la naissance du libéralisme économique*, Paris, 1979, Aubier, Col. "Analyse et raisons".

<sup>23</sup> "What holds Hume's various skeptical arguments together, as has been explained, is *not some unguided philosophical curiosity about an arbitrary set of issues and topics* but rather *the disciplined, focused aim of discrediting the metaphysics and morals of the Christian Religion*", RH, V, C.16, p. 440; emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> RH, V, C.16, p. 440.

<sup>25</sup> Which is just another formulation of Q. Skinner's warning about the regulative use of the methodological postulate of unity of the work.

### 3 Speculative atheism as a principle of reconstruction of the unity of Hume's philosophy

3.1 What structures a great part of Paul Russell's reading effort concerns the hypothesis of the deeply irreligious dimension of Hume's philosophy<sup>26</sup>. The theoretical and practical intention of the author of the *Treatise*, which is first of all polemical, is to question the legitimacy of any religious foundation of knowledge. It is also, and perhaps above all, to secularize morality<sup>27</sup>. So that the whole theory of knowledge must be understood not as a starting point – giving primacy to empiricism –, but as an instrument used to articulate the polemical decision to disqualify religion.

From the moment that knowledge is no longer indebted, for its foundation, to the existence of God, it is appropriate to reconstruct an epistemology that allows for the secularization of its foundations. This secularization is what opens up the tension that works in the tradition of British empiricism as conceived by Hume: the tension between the definition of a rigorous empiricism and the emancipated<sup>28</sup>, so to speak secular, exercise of doubt in order to put to the test the value of human knowledge.

What is classically posed, since the heritage of British empiricism, as an unstable tension between empiricism and skepticism, becomes, with this new point of view of reading, the expression of a new problem which is born and constituted as a consequence of the questioning of the metaphysical pretensions of Christian philosophy: God no longer guaranteeing the certainty and the truth of the knowledge produced by a right use of reason, the foundation of knowledge becomes uncertain again and the general forms of this uncertainty are given in the epistemic tension between the principles of empiricism and the corrosive force of the skeptical attitude of the atheist philosopher. If the resolution of this new problem is thinkable, it can only be deeply human.

In this sense, Paul Russell's hypothesis is also fruitful since it gives a different understanding of the possible Locke/Berkeley/Hume filiation by opposing rightfully the former two to the latter on this crucial point of the relation to the theological and metaphysical foundation of knowledge.

3.2 This hypothesis of Hume's speculative atheism has a historiographical grounding. Paul Russell insists that what motivates it in the first place is the consideration of another context to which the commentary tradition has been rather insensitive

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<sup>26</sup> “Contrary to the accounts suggested by the established interpretations, there is a close and intimate link among all three books of the *Treatise*”, RH, V, C.16, p. 438.

<sup>27</sup> Movement of secularization of which we can say that Hume's naturalism is probably a formidable corrosive instrument. For a description of the effects of naturalism on this precise point of the humanization of morality, one can refer to my commentary of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* - Section 9: Claude Gautier, “De la raison des animaux”, in Claire Echegaray, alii, *Lire l'Enquête sur l'entendement humain de Hume*, Paris, 2022, Vrin, Col. “Études & Commentaires”.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Russell can thus say of some of the features of the *Treatise* that they encouraged “Hume's earliest critics to present his work as belonging in the tradition of “freethinkers” and “minute philosophers,” such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Collins—the very same set of thinkers who served as the principal targets of Clarke's effort to demonstrate “the truth and certainty” of the Christian Religion in his enormously influential *Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God* (1704–1705)”, RH, V, C.16, p. 436.

and which, however, is of decisive importance in Hume's time. It is, to borrow the expression from J. Israel<sup>29</sup>, the context of the "radical Enlightenment".

In this last part of the book, Paul Russell convincingly reminds us that the first receptions of Hume's work were critical readings by philosopher-theologians<sup>30</sup> and that the epistemological terrain was discussed for its metaphysical and theological consequences.

So that the tradition of commentaries that reduces the Humean legacy to this exclusively epistemological or theory of knowledge question is carried by an overly reductive definition of the context from which the work takes its meaning and finds, on the political level, all its polemical value. According to Paul Russell, it is by separating the aspects of the *Treatise* dealing with the theory of knowledge from its radical decision to secularize its foundations that we would miss what makes the true unity and coherence of the Humean doctrine.

It is thus by a significant enlargement of the context in which Hume's work develops and in which it is received, read and criticized, that the hypothesis of the irreligious dimension of the doctrine finds its empirical and historiographical justification.

This first justification raises the question of the delimitation of the context from which to make sense of certain aspects of the work. Here again, it would probably be useful to take into account the considerations of Q. Skinner on the value and limits of contextualism and on the way to understand the relationship that is established between context, text or thought<sup>31</sup>. The whole merit of Paul Russell's approach is that it does not fall into a kind of dogmatic causalism which would make the text a pure reflection of the context in which it is situated.

Paul Russell's interpretative attitude thus leads, positively, to the extension of the context beyond the strictly epistemological questions and puts forward the importance of religious questions and the terms of an often tense dialogue between speculative atheism, theology and metaphysics in the British 18th century. It also allows us to add the objective elements of an immediate critical reception on the metaphysical and theological levels<sup>32</sup>.

It is within this framework, of course, that we must understand the clear assertion that the elision on Hume's part in order to gain the support of the ecclesiastical authorities and, perhaps, access to an academic position, is an unconvincing

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<sup>29</sup> "Hume's *Treatise* philosophy belongs to a tradition of irreligious or "atheistic" thought in which Hume's principal predecessors are Hobbes and Spinoza. What characterizes this tradition - which goes back at least to Lucretius - is the fundamental objective of liberating humanity from the yoke of 'superstition' ". RH, V, C.16, p. 439. We share Paul Russell's point of view according to which it is quite surprising not to find, in J. Israel's *Essay*, Hume's name among the authors who build this "radical Enlightenment": "Hume is probably the most significant contribution to the philosophical literature of the radical Enlightenment", *Ibidem*. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford, 2001, Oxford University Press.

<sup>30</sup> RH, V, C.16, p. 439-s.

<sup>31</sup> See Q. Skinner, I. *Regarding Method*, 5. "Motives, Intentions, Interpretation", in *Visions of Politics, Op. cit.*, p. 90-s.

<sup>32</sup> "The relevant debates reached Hume's doorstep in the Borders during the 1730s, at the same time he was beginning work on the *Treatise*. The key figures involved were Andrew Baxter (a prominent Clarkean) and William Dudgeon (a radical freethinker). These debates also dragged in Hume's arch-nemesis William Warburton, who was a good and close friend of Baxter's. These figures and the controversies associated with them are of considerable importance and relevance for understanding both Hume's philosophy and its early reception—although they are matters that continue to be neglected and downplayed". RH, V, C. 16, fn-10, p. 451-52. See also Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise, Op. cit.*, especially C. 3 "Religious Philosophers and Speculative Atheists", p. 25-s.; and C. 14 "Immateriality, Immortality, and the Human Soul", p. 187-s.

idea<sup>33</sup>. We will admit with Paul Russell that it is possible to read the *Treatise* as an integral justification of the consequences that the renunciation of any theological and metaphysical foundation of knowledge implies.

This new point of view allows us to shift the horizon of meaning from which to interpret the strictly epistemological content of the doctrine. However, there is still one more step to be taken to affirm that this horizon of meaning is precisely what constitutes the whole unity of the work.

3.3 In addition to the historiographical argument, Paul Russell puts forward a series of reasons that confirm this change of viewpoint and give it its methodological value. Among the most important points is the affirmation that with this change in the historian's viewpoint, from a composite set of skeptical considerations on disparate subjects, the *Treatise* becomes a unified, coherent and systematic whole: "Contrary to this view, the irreligious interpretation maintains that it is problems of religion, broadly conceived, that hold the contents of the *Treatise* together as a unified work"<sup>34</sup>. Or, a little further on, after having returned to the general interpretation of the Humean conception of causality<sup>35</sup> as a critical instrument in the service of his irreligion: "the irreligious interpretation not only reconfigures our understanding of the unity and structure of Hume's philosophy, in doing this it also alters our picture of the shape and structure of early modern philosophy as a whole"<sup>36</sup>.

Thus, the adoption of the "irreligious hypothesis" has a double interest: it allows us to be more accurate with regard to the historical context of the writing and reception of the *Treatise* as well as of all his philosophical work; it gives coherence to the *Treatise* and to the whole of his writings<sup>37</sup>.

#### 4 The search for unity as a regulating principle of interpretative pluralism

This reconstruction of coherence starting from the irreligious dimension is thus fruitful; it encompasses a wider corpus to which it gives a certain unity of meaning. Pragmatically, the postulate of unity fully plays its intended methodological function: it allows to gather under the auspices of atheism and its consequences the largest number of texts that constitute Hume's work.

In this respect, and as far as it goes, I fully agree with Paul Russell's own description of his task as that of a historian's: "The internal, persisting problems of interpretation force us *to reconsider these issues and remain open to the possibility of*

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<sup>33</sup> "The solution to the riddle of the *Treatise*, I maintain, begins with a critique of the "castration" hypothesis, which in its unqualified form is simply a myth", RH, V, C.16, p. 435 (and s.). For a detailed analysis of this point, see Paul Russell, 2008, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise, Op. cit.*, C. 18 "The Myth of 'Castration' and the Riddle's Solution", p. 267-s.

<sup>34</sup> RH, V, C. 15, p. 419.

<sup>35</sup> "The preceding general analysis of the way in which Hume applied his theory of causation to the various key themes and issues that he takes up in his writings makes clear that this central pillar of his entire philosophy was employed to support both the skeptical and naturalistic dimensions of his irreligious program. His account of the nature and limits of causal reasoning serves to cordon off and discredit the core ambitions of the religious philosophers...", RH, V, C.16, p. 452.

<sup>36</sup> RH, V, C.16, p. 432. I leave aside the claim that the irreligious hypothesis not only changes our reading of Hume's philosophical work but also our reading of the philosophy of Early Modern Age.

<sup>37</sup> It allows thus, and as an example, to reconsider all the importance of the sections dealing with the will and the free will, liberty & necessity, etc. [*Treatise*, I, 3, 1-3; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 8 "Of Liberty and Necessity", etc.], to redraw the lines going from the *Treatise* to the *Natural History of Religions* and to the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, etc.



"retrieving" a better and more adequate account of how Hume's fundamental philosophical aims and ambitions *can best be represented and articulated*"<sup>38</sup>.

The interpretative attitude, thus requalified, remains "open" and admits that the work of description is, so to speak, always questioned. It calls, as a matter of principle, for its revision in view of a "better" and "more adequate" description or "account".

There is thus a progress of the interpretations, another way of speaking about their historical character. And this progress naturally calls for a certain revisionism. It is in this sense that the application of the methodological principle of the search for unity and coherence of a work, a thought, a doctrine, etc., must always be open and that it fulfills a regulating function of the activity of interpretation.

However, Paul Russell does not seem to limit himself to this kind of formulation to designate the task of the historian of philosophy with regard to Hume's work: "*It should be evident, however, that the irreligious interpretation, as I have described it, takes a different view. According to the irreligious interpretation, there are few, if any, 'loose ends' in Hume's philosophy that are wholly unconnected with his irreligious program*"<sup>39</sup>.

This hypothesis would thus comprehensively meet the methodological requirement of unity and coherence of the work. The "irreligious program" would be able to answer all the questions raised by the heritages and interpretative traditions mentioned so far. It would close the research since finally the unity of meaning or, at least, the principle under the auspices of which to give meaning and coherence to the work, would seem definitively established.

In the first case, the movement of interpretation is not stopped; it remains open and it is always possible to improve its result. From this point of view, the modification by extension of the context of reception or reading of Hume's work has shown how this improvement could be achieved.

There is nothing to prevent us from thinking, *a priori*, that other factors could come later to make the study of the relations between the work and its contexts more complex, less univocal, which would improve the interpretative gains so far obtained. And I believe that by formulating my proposal thus, I do not yield absolutely to interpretative relativism. I am only putting forward the *process* by which an interpretation can be improved, or as Paul Russell so rightly says, made "more adequate".

The criterion remains that of improvement and it is precisely in its name that the work of interpretation remains open and subject to the test of time. As I have suggested from the beginning, this is what the term *critique*, which I have used to designate this methodological rule of search for unity, means here.

In the second case, what is affirmed is something different. From the moment that the methodological principle of the search for unity is no longer limited to its critical function - in this case, to identify a more general plane of meaning that involves the concerns of an epoch and for which the epistemological point of view is redefined within a wider explanatory scheme - then, from being a methodological tool, the search for such a unity risks being transformed into an ontological claim or affirmation of "*what is*".

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<sup>38</sup> RH, V, C. 15, p. 418; the emphasis is mine.

<sup>39</sup> RH, V, C.16, p. 453; the emphasis is mine. We can find other formulations that go in the same direction, for example: "*Obviously, we may be presented with an interpretation that is entirely adequate, in the sense that it reliably and convincingly captures Hume's intentions and views ...*", RH, V, C.15, p. 427; the emphasis is mine.

From then on, the interpretative attitude is exposed to another form of reductionism, which I would like to call *semantic reductionism*. This consists in subsuming the totality of the possible meanings of the theses and arguments forming Hume's work under the sole auspices of the irreligious question. Thus stated, the attitude of interpretation blocks the open movement of elucidation because it presupposes that there is only one way to make "unity" or "coherence".

Can we affirm the uniqueness of the principle - in this case, the irreligious hypothesis - allowing to realize the unity of the work on the grounds that this principle or this hypothesis would allow to attribute a coherence to what can appear as so many scattered theses in Hume's philosophy?

However, nothing allows us to affirm with certainty that all the meanings carried by the said theses are reduced, from the point of view of their comprehension, to making sense only in relation to the irreligious hypothesis. It is a question, without a doubt, of a capital type of signification that allows to unite in a signifying whole a high number of texts and theses. And this is what makes the irreligious hypothesis so fruitful. But should we go so far as to affirm that this is the only way to give coherence to the whole work?

Thus, if the theory of causality as developed by Hume in the *Treatise* and taken up again in many sections of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>40</sup> allows, as a consequence, to radically disqualify the theological justifications of Christian philosophies concerning the cosmological argument, the argument of design, the immortality of the soul, etc.; if such theory is the only way to give coherence to the work as a whole<sup>41</sup>, the fact remains that its critical scope is probably not limited to this one irreligious dimension, which is significant in the wider context of the radical Enlightenment.

It was undoubtedly Hume's intention, at the time of writing the *Treatise* and other texts, to deconstruct the arguments of religious philosophy. In this respect, once again, the contribution of Paul Russell's historiographical work is to have empirically founded this hypothesis. But as soon as Hume's receptions move away from the era of the radical Enlightenment, as soon as they are articulated to other contexts and other motives of reading, it becomes inevitable that this original critical scope is transformed, that it encompasses other meanings and other effects that justify other possible interpretations.

In this sense, there is nothing incompatible between the principle of unity empirically posited by historiography in the context of the radical Enlightenment and the way of interpreting these same theses within the framework of the heritage of British empiricism revisited by naturalism. The former argues for a general principle of continuity in the theses defended from the *Treatise* to the *Dialogues*, while the latter argues for other coherences, local ones certainly, which, without necessarily claiming to draw out the *total* unity of the doctrine, nonetheless stylize degrees of consistency that it is advisable, once again, to discover, interpret and critique.

The question then arises as to what is meant by the unity of the work? For methodological reasons, would it not be useful to make use of an open concept of unity allowing to preserve its regulatory and critical function. And what can it mean, from the point of view of the activity of interpretation, that the irreligious

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<sup>40</sup> Specially Sections 4 & 5.

<sup>41</sup> As Paul Russell convincingly shows.

hypothesis allows to unify the *totality* of the work? Is it a question of designating the empirical unity of the work? The unity of signification?

If we admit that the unit of coherence can, methodologically, be declined at various levels, we may have a way of preserving the critical and instrumental function of this tool and, at the same time, of guarding ourselves against the risk of confusion between a regulatory use and an ontological use of this tool.

I would like to illustrate by two examples the importance of this distinction that it seems useful to maintain. The first one brings into play the unity on a more local scale of Hume's work, that of the *Treatise*; the second one allows us to return to the criterion of exhaustiveness claimed by the irreligious hypothesis. In both cases, it is a different way of asking the question of the unity of coherence that is involved.

#### 4-1 The example of personal identity<sup>42</sup>

We know that the problem of personal identity constitutes today a domain in its own right of the research in contemporary philosophy. It has also become the object of a history. To take just one example, Harold W. Noonan, in *Personal Identity*<sup>43</sup>, proposes a taxonomy of criteria<sup>44</sup> and then goes on to study the successive formulations of the problem from Locke, Leibniz, Butler, Reid, Hume, etc., to Parfit.

The constitution of such a field included a series of current concerns that have an impact on the way we read the texts of the past. Noonan proposes to lead the historical analysis of this problem towards the most accomplished formulations<sup>45</sup>.

The authors are then considered from a double point of view: on the one hand, it is a question of showing what they add to the problem they inherit - from Locke to Berkeley, for example, from Locke and Berkeley to Hume, etc.; on the other hand, it is a question of showing what they add to the problem they inherit. On the other hand, it is a matter of pointing out the objective difficulties that remain unresolved from one author to the next and that justify the subsequent elaborations. It is thus a question of practicing a controlled form of retrospective reading. The statement of the problem is thus inserted in a network of interrogations which situate it as *a moment* of a never completed historical narrative. The difficulty lies, however, in the division that such an approach makes, within the doctrines under consideration, between what belongs to the question or the problem and what does not.

If the problem of personal identity is today a problem in its own right, if it is endowed with a certain conceptual and argumentative autonomy, it has not always been so. It so happens that for authors as important as Locke, Hume, etc., the question of personal identity appears at a given moment in a larger work whose rationale, often complex, is not necessarily or directly devoted to it.

If it may appear to contemporary commentators that the problem posed by Hume, for example, does not find a solution or raises insurmountable contradictions, one may wonder, *methodologically*, if such contradictions are not also, and perhaps above all, the expression of the terms of the comparison made between what

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<sup>42</sup> For what follows see my more thorough study: Claude Gautier: "L'identité personnelle chez Hume: l'idée d'un self relationnel et affectif", in Alexandre Charrier and Claire Etchegaray (éds.): *Le Soi. Nouvelles perspectives humiennes*, Paris, 2020, Hermann, p. 115-134.

<sup>43</sup> Harold W. Noonan, *Personal Identity*, Routledge, London, 2003 ([2001] 2d ed.).

<sup>44</sup> This is the subject of the whole first chapter "An Initial Survey", Noonan, *Op. cit.*, p. 1-24.

<sup>45</sup> Noonan, *Op. cit.*, C. 9: "Parfit and What Matters in Survival," p. 160-174.

is said about this problem by these authors *in their time*, and what we say about it *today*?

Another way of proceeding would be to confront, in Hume's work for example, all the statements that deal with this problem of identity. This means, in particular, not limiting ourselves to Book I of the *Treatise*, but widening the field of investigation to Books II and III.

One of the obstacles to a coherent interpretation of Hume's "problem" of personal identity thus lies in this doubly anachronistic way of interrogating the text: on the one hand, by extracting Section I,4,6 "Of personal identity"<sup>46</sup> to make it an autonomous development<sup>47</sup>; on the other hand, within this same section, by concealing a certain number of considerations that invite the reader to continue beyond Book I.

Not everything is said about personal identity in Book I because this problem, in Hume, is not indebted to *an exclusively epistemological and ontological formulation*. N. Kemp Smith had already insisted on this point and on the necessity to articulate the considerations of Section I,4,6 with those of the first part of Book II<sup>48</sup>.

If we go back to the letter of Hume's text, it is clear that he explicitly indicates the approach to be followed: "*In order to answer this question, we must distinguish between personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves*", and, a little further on, still in the same section: "*The first is our present subject*"<sup>49</sup>. Two levels of analysis are thus to be distinguished: the one that relates the problem of identity "to thought and imagination" and concerns the study of "ideas" - which delimits a field of investigation that is that of epistemology and ontology - Book I; the one that relates this problem to affects, passions and interest as an operative modality of another figure of the self - which delimits another field of investigation that is that of affective life and praxeology - Books II & III.

The plan of coherence necessary for a more accurate restitution of the complexity of Hume's analysis of personal identity goes far beyond Book I. Methodologically, and against certain contemporary readings of Hume that reduce the analysis to the epistemological and ontological levels only, the interest and, undoubtedly, the relevance of the Humean text on this question only appears if the context and the coherence of the analysis are extended to the three Books of the *Treatise*<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Vol. 1, ed. D. F. & M. J. Norton, Oxford, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume, 2007; THN, I,4,6, p. 164-s.

<sup>47</sup> To which we add the remarks of the *Appendix*, THN, I, Appendix, 398-401.

<sup>48</sup> This is the 1<sup>st</sup> part on "Pride and Humility" in THN, II, 1. See N. Kemp Smith in *The Philosophy of David Hume, Op. cit.*, especially chapter viii, first section "The idea of the Self an indispensable conditioning Accompaniment of Pride and Humility", p. 179-180. In this passage, N. Kemp Smith makes a very illuminating interpretation of the Humean problem of "personal identity" which cannot be limited to an exclusive reading of Section I,4,6 and requires a re-elaboration from the description of affective relationships. This point suffices, moreover, to relativize Paul Russell's assertion that, as he explicitly states, N. Kemp Smith would be mistaken in separating Book I and Books II & III: "This shows, among other things, that Kemp Smith, and those who follow him, are seriously mistaken when they treat Book II on the passions as of peripheral or marginal relevance to Hume's project", RH, V, C.16, 438. It is therefore quite the opposite which allows him, here, to posit the naturalistic thesis of the affective dimension of the constitution of the "self".

<sup>49</sup> THN, I, 4,6,5, p. 165.

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed analysis of these aspects of the Humean thesis on personal identity, see my study already mentioned and Claude Gautier: *Voir et connaître la société. Regarder à distance dans les Lumières écossaises*, Lyon, 2020, Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Col. "La croisée des chemins" : 1.2. "Hume et le travail de relations", p. 48-64.

This enlargement of the scope of analysis is justified here by the application of the methodological principle of seeking superior unity and coherence. This then allows us to propose a more "adequate" account of Hume's approach, to use Paul Russell's terms. From then on, what is often considered as a set of insurmountable impossibilities or contradictions finds, by virtue of this methodical extension of the context of textual analysis, a possible resolution. Indeed, such a search for coherence shows that it is contrary to the spirit of Humean philosophical reasoning to want to separate ontological and epistemological determinations from affective and moral determinations in the empirical constitution of the "natural belief" in personal identity.

This example finally shows the relevance of a localized and controlled application of the methodological principle of the search for unity and coherence in the analysis of a problem. In the case of personal identity, this is one means to rehabilitate what makes the strength and originality of the Humean approach.

We can admit, by generalization, that this level of relevance or coherence plays out differently according to the problems discussed. The highlighting of the effects of meanings linked to variations in scale is, in my opinion, a source of fruitful critical readings.

#### **4-2 A comprehensive unit of the work? The relationship between philosophy and history**

The example of personal identity shows that, provided we have recourse to an operative concept of unity of coherence, which does not necessarily presuppose a unique and exclusive scale of reference that would be that of the totality of Hume's philosophical work, the methodological instrument of extension and constitution of the unity of meaning of a thesis or a problem allows useful critical readings.

The fact remains that the formulations already noted that describe Paul Russell's work as a historian of philosophy does not really discuss the conceptual or instrumental content that should be given to his category of unity or totality of the work.

If I agree with him that the "irreligious hypothesis" allows us to reconstruct a unity of meaning that integrates most of the great texts of Hume's literary work, the fact remains that this assertion can in turn be exposed to a relatively classic objection: does the unity in question allow us to take into account the totality of Hume's philosophical work? Which totality is it or which unity of coherence is it? And, once again, whether it is an empirical totality - the whole of all the texts written by Hume - or a totality of meaning - the "irreligious program" - can we affirm, once and for all, that this totality or this unity is exhaustive and that it definitively subsumes, under the hypothesis of the irreligious dimension, all of Hume's philosophy?

By the first example of personal identity, I tried to show that we could make an operative use<sup>51</sup> of a concept of unity of coherence whose criterion of application is partly carried by the problem or the argument we have to study. I would like to conclude this study with some remarks concerning the question of history in Hume.

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<sup>51</sup> I borrow here from E. Fink the distinction between operative and thematic concepts. See « Les concepts opératoires dans la phénoménologie de Husserl » in Eugen Fink *Proximité et distance* [*Distanz und Proximität* - 1976 - French translation by Jean Kessler], Grenoble, 1994, Million, Col. « Krisis », especially p. 159-155.

This question, in my opinion, illustrates exemplarily the kind of difficulty one can be exposed to if the concept of unity and/or totality of the work is understood in a sense that is not strictly operative or instrumental anymore.

In two footnotes<sup>52</sup>, Paul Russell mentions Hume's work as a historian. The first note emphasizes that Hume was a historian and that his reputation as a man of letters was first that of a historian. It is only later that the situation was reversed, and his historical work took a back seat. The second note briefly returns to the question of history, concerning the definition of "interpretative accuracy" that should animate the historian of philosophy. It puts forward the importance that one must give to "historical imagination" in order to better distance oneself from the values of the "scientist" that dominate, today, the work of the philosopher<sup>53</sup>.

Paul Russell, while recognizing, on the one hand, the importance of Hume's work as a historian and, on the other hand, the usefulness, not to say the creativity, of the impact of historical imagination, including on the contemporary practice of philosophy, seems to renew a distinction, also consecrated by the posterity of Hume's literary and philosophical works: Hume would have been a philosopher and a historian; and it is the philosophical part of the work that must retain one's attention<sup>54</sup>.

One may wonder, here, about the acritical renewed use of this distinction. For, after all, there is every reason to understand, beyond the complex history of Hume's posterity, why he was so interested in history as a literary genre, and in philosophy as a reflective practice. Even more radically, we can ask ourselves if this distinction, which posterity or, in Paul Russell's vocabulary, a certain heritage of interpretations, has established and solidified, is not also arbitrary when it comes to Hume's philosophical practice.

The problem could then be formulated as follows: if Hume admits, during his lifetime, the failure of his *Treatise*<sup>55</sup>, he resorts, from the writing of the first *Enquiry*, to other writing strategies where the essay will predominate; where the concern for a more literary type of writing will become a constant preoccupation; where, finally, the question of the relation to a literate public of male and female readers will determine, in part, the literary form in which to structure the philosophical content of his thought. One is absolutely not denying the validity of the *Treatise* but one should accept that after the publication of the *Treatise*, Hume significantly modifies his way of practicing philosophy. This more literary orientation of his writing and the priority given to other forms - essays, dialogues, histories, etc. - in order to present his thought must then incline the historian of philosophy to question the relevance of the distinction consolidated by the traditions of interpretation that so clearly separate his "philosophical" work from his "literary and historical" work.

In a way, it would be useful for the historian of philosophy interested in Hume's work to reconsider the relevance of this distinction between "history" and "philosophy" in an attempt to understand that, perhaps, the evolution of his practice as a man of letters, throughout his career is not only guided by circumstantial concerns

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<sup>52</sup> RH, V, C. 15, fn.3, p. 406; fn.34, p. 423.

<sup>53</sup> "Contemporary philosophy is heavily dominated by the values and methods of science - if not scientism - in such a manner ...", *Ibid.* p. 423.

<sup>54</sup> "In this essay I am concerned with these issues as they relate, more specifically, to describing and evaluating the philosophical legacy of David Hume", RH, V, C. 15, p. 406; this emphasis is mine.

<sup>55</sup> See his "Advertisement" to the Reader which appears in the first edition of *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*: "Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles", ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford, 1999, Oxford University Press, p. 87.

of a successful genre - such as the writing of a general history like his *History of England* - but that, perhaps, his philosophical project implies, in its own way, the drawing together of philosophical reflection and of historical factuality.

I have shown elsewhere<sup>56</sup> that one of the particularities of the Humean text, in the moral and political domains, lies in the meeting of two connected but distinct discursive planes: a moral philosophy defined as a "science of generalities"<sup>57</sup>, a history understood as a narration of events whose main stage is the Modern (British) Civil Society. It is then possible to understand that what makes the strength and the originality of the Humean text is *a narrative device* where history and philosophy are mutually involved and constitute *a new critical device*.

But highlighting this implies going against the received idea of such a clear distinction between the philosophical work and the historical work in order to understand that the question of historical knowledge is involved much more deeply in the anthropology, the epistemology and the Humean philosophy of belief<sup>58</sup>.

All these conditions which, finally, define a new point of view of reading for the historian of philosophy, perhaps allow us to understand that Hume's philosophical practice, in the field of morality, politics, aesthetics, etc., redefines its relations to the knowledges which are external to it and on which, nevertheless, it depends. As if it was a question of putting to the test in a continuous way the generality of his propositions by the recourse to history. As if it was a question of developing a new critical device where the skeptical attitude operates by the means of the permanent confrontation of the generality of the philosophical propositions with the empirical ground of history - the observation of a certain "reality".

For all these reasons, philosophical and historical, the distinction consecrated by certain interpretative traditions of Hume's work, deserves to be questioned, put to the test, criticized in order to prove the existence of a wider form of reflexive and critical unity which, in the way of combining philosophy and history, gives to Hume's skepticism a methodological and positive orientation<sup>59</sup>.

Beyond these general considerations, which it is not useful to develop here, what can we take away from this second example for the question posed since the beginning about the recourse to the methodological principle of the search for unity and coherence in Hume's work?

Mainly two things: on the one hand, what makes unity or totality of Hume's work, beyond the irreligious hypothesis, is likely to refer to other textual configurations - be they empirical and material or of meanings. The hypothesis that I defend, of a broader apprehension of the relationship between philosophy and history in Hume, modifies the content that we can attribute to what Paul Russell designates as "unity" or "totality" of the work. In this case, it is a greater unity or totality since it challenges the distinction, consecrated by posterity, between philosophical works and literary and historical works.

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<sup>56</sup> See, for a more thorough and complete reading, Claude Gautier, *Hume et les savoirs de l'histoire*, Paris, 2005, Vrin-EHESS, Col. "Contextes".

<sup>57</sup> D. Hume [1742], "That Politics may be reduced to a Science", in *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, E. F. Miller (ed.), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 14-s.

<sup>58</sup> On the question of the place of history in the *Treatise*, see Claude Gautier, "Les usages de l'histoire et la théorie politique chez Hume", *Revue philosophique de France et de l'étranger*, 2001/2, tome 126, p. 191-212.

<sup>59</sup> I develop all of these lines of interpretation of Hume's work especially in the second part of *Hume et les savoirs de l'histoire*: "L'histoire comme critique. Description du travail de généralisation en politique", *Op. cit.* p. 151-286.

Here is not the place to ascertain whether my hypothesis is valid or not, yet the fact remains that posing the question in these terms and, consequently, defining another "point of view of reading" for the historian of philosophy who is interested in Hume, is enough to relativize the content of what is to be understood, in Paul Russell's terms, as the "unity" of the work as a whole.

### 5 To conclude...

Clearly, the "Irreligious Hypothesis" and the research program it defines constitute a major contribution to Humean studies in the history of philosophy. This approach allows, without any doubt, to reconstruct a wider unity of meaning of Hume's works and sheds light from another angle on the importance of the Humean theory of knowledge by instrumentalizing it, so to speak, in the service of the radical critique of religion.

It does not seem to me, however, that such a scheme of historical interpretation is incompatible with the interpretative contributions, often consecrated by posterity, linked to the legacies of "British empiricism" and "naturalism".

There is no incompatibility in principle between this historical approach and the more localized analyses that make it possible to bring to light, sometimes against reductionist readings, what makes the strength and the relevance of the Humean positions.

Finally, it is probable that the unity and totality that the work of Paul Russell, historian of philosophy, makes it possible to restore is not incompatible with other ways of conceiving the justification of the general coherence of the Humean work.

At the end of this "inquiry", it seems to me more necessary than ever to defend the idea of *a certain pluralism of interpretations* which, alone, allows us to take note of the complexity of a "work" and of its posterities.

This on the condition, however, that the search for unity remains on a *pragmatic*, i.e., *methodological*, level. The fruitfulness of this tool can then be declined in the plurality of dimensions and ways of establishing coherence. The unity of coherence thus remains the regulating and critical horizon of the work of interpretation of the historian as well as of the philosopher.