

## CHAPTER 24

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# HUME'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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DAVID Hume never wrote the “book” on politics that, in the preface to the initial section, he promised he would add to the three others that make up his *Treatise of Human Nature*. But we are not short of evidence for his views on the topic. In addition to his extended discussion of the origins and nature of government in the completed text of the *Treatise*, he wrote numerous essays devoted to political questions, and his six-volume *History of England* contains extensive reflections on issues relevant to political philosophy. These diverse writings reflect a coherent set of interests and convictions, and it is thus quite legitimate to speak of Hume’s political philosophy. There is little agreement among scholars, however, about the precise nature of this philosophy or its implications for modern thought. Some interpret Hume as a reformer, in tune with the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment; others, as a conservative who applies his skeptical principles to political questions. This chapter attempts to survey the full diversity of Hume’s writings on political themes in order to allow for a clearer understanding of his importance to the history of political thought.

## I THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE QUESTION OF ALLEGIANCE

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Hume published the third “book” of the *Treatise*, the section of the larger work devoted to morality, the nature of justice, and the foundation of government, in 1740, a year after the publication of the work’s initial two sections. After its release, the French journal *Bibliothèque raisonnée* ran a stinging review that claimed: “here, as you can see . . . is the system of Hobbes dressed up in a new taste” (Mossner 1982: 139). This is unfair. Like Frances Hutcheson, to whom he sent a copy of the *Treatise*, Hume rejects Hobbes’s

strictly egoistic account of human nature. He readily grants that we naturally possess benevolent sentiments and frequently act on them. However, as the French reviewer notices, Hume thinks that, for the purposes of law and politics, we must assume people will act selfishly, just as Hobbes tells us they will. Because property must be perfectly secure in order for society to thrive, the state and its laws must protect us from one another when we are at our worst, rather than depending on us to act our best. “A man’s property,” Hume says, “is supposed to be fenced against every mortal, in every possible case” (T 3.2.1.17/483).

Hume rejects another idea that is central to Hobbes’s political theory: that of the social contract. He thinks Hobbes’s basic premise, that society is founded by a deliberate act of contracting, runs contrary to the evident historical facts. As he points out, in most nations, we have no record of any such founding act of contract. And, even had such an event occurred, every nation’s rulers have changed so often that we cannot possibly assert a continuous line of legitimacy between any existing regime and the one to which the people originally pledged their allegiance (ESY 471). Hume argues that government instead results from a process of gradual, unplanned evolution. As he puts it, the state “must be esteemed in a manner accidental, and the effect of many ages” (T 3.2.2.14/492).

Hume provides a brief (and admittedly speculative) overview of how this process takes place. He says that people in a “wild uncultivated state” acquire what he calls an “early education in society” by forming bonds of family, and these bonds have the effect of making them “sensible of the advantages which they may reap” from living together with their fellows—what Hume calls “the sweets of society and mutual assistance” (T 3.2.2.4/486; T 3.2.2.9/489; T 3.2.8.8/538). But before they can actually come together in large numbers, they need to determine “how to separate their possessions, and assign to each his particular portion”—or, in other words, how to govern “the stability of possession” and “the transference of property” (T 3.2.3.4/503; T 3.2.4.1/514). Although the rules to do so are easily arrived at—“the shortest experience of society discovers them to every mortal”—they are not as easily enforced (T 3.2.5.11/522). People may know the benefits that accrue to them when everyone follows the rules. However, we are impulsive creatures, and the temptations to free-ride are strong. “The consequences of every breach of equity seem to lie very remote,” Hume says, “and are not able to counterbalance any immediate advantage that may be reaped from it” (T 3.2.7.3/535). He says that people therefore need to place restraints on themselves, and they require a neutral third party to enforce them. They do not, however, deliberately select magistrates with this end in mind. Instead, Hume says that the first rulers in societies tend to be chieftains who acquire authority as war leaders (T 3.2.8.2/540–1). Once such a chieftain is in power in a society, however, the people quickly see “the sensible utility” of having a single authority that can enforce the conventions governing property. And the utility of this early government produces, over time, “an habitual, and, if you please to call it so, a voluntary . . . acquiescence in the people” (ESY 468–9). Government serves the need we all have for security of property, and, once it has come about through historical accident, it earns our allegiance for this reason. But it is not the result of a deliberate choice or plan by any individuals.

In criticizing the social contract, Hume has in mind not only Hobbes, but also, perhaps primarily, Locke. Locke anticipated that his version of the contract might be challenged on grounds of historical accuracy. He called such a challenge a “mighty objection” to his theory (1994: 276; cf., 333–4). The concern is not simply academic. If we claim that governments are legitimate just because their people have consented to them, then, where the facts suggest that the people have *not* consented, it follows that such governments—nearly all existing ones, Hume says—are not legitimate. This means that no one need feel any obligation to obey them, a conclusion that threatens to create social chaos. Locke tries to answer the objection by claiming that the people of a commonwealth tacitly consent to its government by living in the society and benefitting from it and that this generates an obligation to obey. Hume rejects such “tacit consent,” however, on the grounds that few citizens have the ability to quit their native country if they do not approve of its leaders (ESY 475).

Hume's criticisms of the social contract have been taken by many readers as decisive against it. However, there is a good reason why contract theories have remained an enduring feature of Western political thought. They provide us with a very effective technique for clarifying the conditions under which we should consider an existing regime to be legitimate. By imagining ourselves in a state of nature, we can see more clearly what we consider to be the true purpose of government by asking what sort of government we would acquiesce to if we lacked one altogether. The answer to this question then gives us a means of addressing what both Hobbes and Locke see as the central problem of political philosophy: when does an actual, existing regime deserve our allegiance, and when may the people consider themselves justified in resisting it? If we are to consider Hume not just as a gadfly critic finding flaws in the logic of his predecessors, but also as a political theorist in his own right, we should ask whether he can provide us with an answer to this question of allegiance to government. In fact, Hume considers himself to have done so, and his answer is original and important.

Although Hobbes and Locke both use the contract technique, they produce different answers to the question of allegiance. Hobbes's doctrine of obedience is very stringent. Because he believes that the essential purpose of government is to provide us with personal security, he thinks that we must recognize the legitimacy of any regime that can maintain a minimal level of public order and does not directly threaten our survival. He says that only a direct threat to our life, which we have a natural right to protect, justifies resistance. Locke wants to say that government exists to protect a more extensive set of natural rights: not only to life but also to liberty and property (or “estate”). Its duty to protect the latter implies, as the American colonists were later famously to insist, that it cannot even tax citizens without their consent (1994: 362). Locke thinks that if a particular regime ignores or invades any of these rights, resistance is legitimate. His theory is clearly more radical than that of Hobbes. Both men's accounts share one feature in common, however: they both appeal to a notion of natural rights to determine the limits of state power. They agree that the state is legitimate just to the extent that it respects our basic rights. Hobbes simply defines these rights more austere than Locke does. In place of the natural rights of Hobbes and Locke, Hume offers something very

different: the standard of utility. He says that “government binds us to obedience only on account of its tendency to public utility” (ESY 489). (Hume uses “utility” in its colloquial sense, meaning usefulness, rather than in the technical sense Bentham later gave it, of measurable units of pleasure.) Hume’s purpose here is to change the terms of the debate entirely. Rather than asking the abstract question, when are we justified in overthrowing an existing government, he wants us to ask, more practically, when do we benefit from doing so? “We ought always,” he says, “to weigh the advantages which we reap from authority, against the disadvantages” (T 3.2.10.1/554).

Once we make such calculations, we should see that we nearly always do better to keep with the government we have, assuming that it is well-established and is able to accomplish its basic purpose. “It is not with forms of government,” Hume warns, “as with other artificial contrivances; where an old engine may be rejected, if we can discover another more accurate and commodious, or where trials may safely be made, even though the success be doubtful” (ESY 512). On the contrary, he says of “violent innovations” in politics: “more ill than good is ever to be expected from them” (ESY 477). He gives several arguments to support this cautious conclusion. First of all, he says that insurrection is “unavoidably attended with bloodshed and confusion,” and very often ends in a state of complete anarchy—an outcome that is worse than life under even the most oppressive government (T 3.2.10.6/557). “There is not a more terrible event,” he says, “than a total dissolution of government” (ESY 472). He also says that when rulers perceive “a disposition to rebellion” among their subjects, they will become more oppressive out of self-defense, applying “many violent measures which they never would have embraced, had every one been inclined to submission and obedience” (ESY 490). Finally, he says that a rebellion in one country undermines people’s respect for authority in others and can thus lead to “the subversion of all government, and . . . an universal anarchy and confusion among mankind” (T 3.2.10.1/553).

Hume’s caution in such matters entails a doctrine of allegiance that is markedly more strict than that of Locke. “The common rule requires submission,” he says, “and ’tis only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place” (T 3.2.10.1/553). However, he remains very far from Hobbes as well, and he rejects the Tory principle of passive obedience, which he calls “an absurdity” (T 3.2.9.4/552). Hume thinks that we can point to more than a few cases of “grievous tyranny and oppression” where rebellion is warranted, and he admits that “many constitutions, and none more than the British, have been improved even by violent innovations” (T 3.2.9.4/552).<sup>1</sup> Because obedience is always a matter of weighing costs and benefits in individual cases, Hume is unwilling to formulate a general criterion that could tell us definitively when insurrection is warranted. He says that “it is certainly impossible for the laws, or even for philosophy, to establish any particular rules by which we may know when resistance is lawful, and decide all controversies which may arise on that subject” (T 3.2.10.16.360).

Hume’s rejection of the social contract is of a piece with his critiques of various metaphysical and theological views in the earlier sections of the *Treatise*. In all these cases, he wants us to be suspicious of abstract speculation when such speculation can only have negative consequences for our everyday lives. He thinks that the convictions of

both Whigs, who appeal to the “original contract,” and Tories, who urge passive obedience, may be summarized by the old Latin maxim, “*fiat Justitia et ruat Coelum*”—as he translates it, “let justice be performed, though the universe be destroyed.” He insists that this maxim “is apparently [i.e. obviously] false, and by sacrificing the end to the means, shews a preposterous idea of the subordination of duties” (ESY 489). Hume thinks that there is no principle of right or justice that, viewed in the abstract, can justify us in undermining society’s ultimate end, peace and stability. To put the matter in modern terms, he calls on us to abjure “rights talk” in favor of a cautious consequentialism that looks always to the impact of our actions on the overall public good.

## II HISTORY AND THE SCIENCE OF POLITICS

Hume’s attempt to carve a middle path on the question of allegiance between Whigs and Tories reflects his life-long project of seeking moderation in politics. “I have the impudence to pretend that I am of no party,” he told a friend, “and have no bias” (LET 1.184). He was amused to see that some readers of his *History of England* accused him of obviously favoring the Whig, and others, the Tory point of view. We can also see his negative critiques as serving a larger, constructive purpose: to change the focus of political philosophy, turning philosophers away from the problem of allegiance and toward the more practical question of how society should be organized. If his discussion of the social contract and the question of obedience is one that we would now recognize as belonging to political philosophy proper, the bulk of Hume’s writings on political themes are closer to what we would now call political science. Something like this distinction was recognized at the time. Locke says that there are two parts to political philosophy: “the one containing the original of societies and the rise and extent of political power, the other, the art of governing men in society” (Locke 1994: 400). Having offered his view on the first question in the *Treatise*, Hume spent a sizable portion of his working life trying to produce insights that would be of use to those concerned with the second.

One scholar has termed Hume’s approach “scientific Whiggism” (Forbes 1985: 125–92). And, indeed, Hume devotes an entire essay to arguing that “Politics May Be Reduced to a Science” (ESY 14–31). With this end in mind, he gathers together data on different regimes throughout the world and throughout history and tries to infer general maxims based on this data. Although he was not the first person to apply such empirical methodology to political questions, he was certainly a pioneer in the practice, and this forms an important, if often neglected, aspect of his legacy. In developing his “science of politics,” Hume was clearly influenced by Montesquieu. However, he rejects the Frenchman’s conviction that the character of a people is determined by its environment. Hume sees a more complex dynamic at work, with the economy, law, government, technology, and the arts all mutually interacting to shape the culture and morality of a particular nation (see ESY 111–37). He does not adopt the “four-stage” view that was popular among other thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Instead, he makes a somewhat rough division

between those cultures he calls “barbarous” and those he calls “civilized.” Although he thinks that the nations of Europe have generally progressed from one to the other, this progress has been neither steady nor linear. He suggests that the most civilized society in history was that of Augustan Rome, and he expresses sympathy with Machiavelli’s pessimistic view that all societies rise and fall in cycles (HE 2.519, 508; cf. LET 1.273). And, like government itself, he sees social progress, when it happens, to be unplanned, the result of individuals responding to their immediate circumstances.

We can see Hume’s method at work in the *History of England*. As he tells the story, after the end of Roman rule, Britain went through a long feudal period when the power of the crown depended on the energy and ability of the individual who wore it. A strong monarch could wield near absolute power, whereas a weak one could do nothing to restrain the great magnates. “Thus,” he says, “all was confusion and disorder” (HE 1.361–2). Gradually, however, the nation was able to develop what Hume calls “a more regular plan of liberty” (HE 5.40). By this, he means, first of all, that the laws came to be enforced reliably and impartially and “were not supported singly by the authority of the sovereign” (HE 5.40). Second, the laws came to place restraints on the rulers themselves: the monarch, his ministers, and his “inferior magistrates” such as judges. However, this legal change happened only over many centuries and was the result of various causes. Enlightened monarchs, such as Edward I, played a role by making wise laws that, through their evident utility, endured through time (HE 2.141). The increasing sophistication of law and politics on the continent also contributed, by providing examples and principles (HE 2.521; HE 1.372). Economic development, especially as a result of the colonization of North America, created a prosperous “third estate” that demanded both liberty and stability (HE 2.108–9; HE 3.80). Religion also contributed, as people seeking religious liberty moved to demand broader freedoms. Hume says that the process culminated in the 1689 Revolution Settlement, when the monarchy’s last prerogative powers were dispensed with, and the crown and people “were finally taught to know their proper boundaries”: the former to make laws that were “inflexible either by spite or favour” and the second to maintain a “watchful jealousy” over the magistrates without undermining their authority (HE 4.476; T 3.2.3.3/502; ESY 12). Following the Revolution, Britain achieved a happy balance between central power and popular freedom, although only as the result of a series of perilous struggles and larger cultural shifts.

Hume decided not to continue his *History* past the final volumes, which culminated in the Glorious Revolution. (The volumes covering this later period were actually written and published first.) He feared that the rancor of contemporary debate would make it impossible for any work on more recent times to receive a fair hearing. However, in his political essays, he offers observations on the politics of his day, including reflections on the party system itself. I have already said that Hume boasted of being without partisan bias. This in itself was not original—it was, in fact, common for people to eschew partisan labels at the time. During this era, political parties were dismissed as “factions” that threatened the unity of the nation and thereby weakened it. According to conventional wisdom, what was supposedly needed instead was impartial “patriotism.” Despite the



pride he took in his own impartiality, however, Hume did not accept this conventional disdain for parties themselves. He was highly original in recognizing that Britain's two main parties each represented a principle that was important to the health of the British government and that the constant competition between them, so long as it could be kept within reasonable bounds, had genuine value. Hume says:

in all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest. A great sacrifice of liberty must necessarily be made in every government; yet even the authority, which confines liberty, can never, and perhaps ought never, in any constitution, to become quite entire and uncontrollable. (ESY 40)

It is the two parties in Great Britain that ensure the balance between liberty and authority that marks a stable, civilized government—the Tories by defending authority, the Whigs by defending liberty. Hume thinks that matters were confused somewhat in Britain by lingering divisions over the legitimacy of the House of Stuart, as well as by residual religious disputes. It was, above all, religious divisions, rather than the spirit of party itself, that had in the past allowed political disputes to become violent confrontations. He speculates that the two parties might be better replaced by Court and Country parties, which would more clearly represent the basic, and necessary, division in public life. And, with the growing acceptance of the 1689 settlement as the basis for the constitution, he saw evidence that this was happening. If he failed to predict the durability of the labels “Whig” and “Tory,” he was certainly right to see that the party divisions in Britain were stabilizing around a core set of issues concerning the powers of the Crown and Parliament, with religion playing a minor and steadily decreasing role. And he was also correct, and highly original, in realizing that the party system had come to represent a force for stability in British politics rather than its opposite.

Hume says that only a few small changes would be necessary to make Britain “the most perfect model of limited monarchy.” First of all, he says he would like to see the Commons reformed, according to “the plan of Cromwell's parliament,” to give each constituency an equal number of voters (ESY 526). Second, he says he would like to do away with bishops and hereditary peers in the House of Lords, with new peers appointed by the existing body of life peers, so that the upper house could “consist entirely of the men of chief credit, abilities, and interest in the nation” (ESY 527). This would establish an aristocracy of talent. Such an aristocracy can give stability to the government by providing steady guidance that protects against the dangers of both tyranny and royal weakness.

As a speculative exercise, Hume offers a scheme for what he calls a “perfect commonwealth” (ESY 5612–29). Despite his admiration for Britain's mixed government, Hume in fact proposes a republic as his ideal state, with neither a monarch nor a hereditary aristocracy. He tries to design a republican government that could govern a large territory by means of a system of representative democracy that preserves strong elements of local autonomy. He gives a vote to adult male freeholders and householders—subject

to a property qualification, modest for country landowners although high for urbanites. They elect county representatives, who then elect county magistrates and senators. Power is divided among these various officials, with county representatives meeting locally in groups of one hundred to propose legislation that is then debated in the national senate before being voted on at the county level (although subject to a senate veto). The scheme is intricate, and we can only suspect it would prove unworkable in practice. But its importance lies not in its details but in the conventional view that it challenged.

Hume believes that by giving so much power to the counties—he says that “every county is a kind of republic within itself”—he has solved the problem of how to achieve the republican scheme on a large scale (ESY 520). It had long been an axiom of political thought—one found in numerous ancient authors, as well as modern ones such as Machiavelli and Montesquieu—that (as Hume elsewhere puts it) republicanism “is only fitted for a small State” (LET 2.306). Hume was perhaps the first major thinker to challenge the conventional view that a large republic was unfeasible and to consider how one might be structured. Scholars have speculated that his plan for a large-state republic may have influenced James Madison, who in his tenth “Federalist” paper also outlines a plan to make republicanism workable on a large scale. There are significant differences between Madison’s views and Hume’s. However, Madison certainly read Hume’s work, as did many in revolution-era America, and it is plausible to suggest that his essay helped convince at least some people in the Colonies that a new, representative federalism was a realistic form of political organization, one that could overcome the problems past republics had encountered in trying to rule over large, populous territories.

Although Hume devotes considerable attention to the merits and drawbacks of different forms of government, ultimately, he thinks a country’s constitutional structure is less important than the sorts of laws it implements. With the right sort of laws, either a republic, a monarchy, or a mixture of the two may qualify as a civilized government. In a truly civilized state, the ruler (or rulers) establishes a system of “general laws” that treat similar cases consistently, treat all citizens the same, restrict the discretionary powers of the magistrates, and subject these magistrates themselves to the laws (ESY 125; ESY 12; EM App. 3.10/99). Such a system of laws allows commerce to thrive, and this in turn stimulates broader changes in technology and culture.

### III CONSERVATISM, REFORM, AND REVOLUTION

I have already observed that Hume considered himself to be above the partisan divisions of his time. However, the terms of political debate changed dramatically in the decades after Hume’s death. We can only speculate how he would have reacted to the “age of revolution” that began in the last years of his life. He did comment on the early stages of the



colonial rebellion, surprising his friends by supporting the American rebels. However, his support was the exception that proves his general rule concerning revolution. As he saw it, the revolt had very quickly reached the point at which any attempts to suppress it would generate social chaos, and so the need for stability required the British government to seek an amicable solution. Had Hume lived long enough to witness the French Revolution, it is difficult to imagine him giving it any support, at least once it had moved beyond its early, peaceful stage, and its leaders had abandoned any pretense of following established constitutional processes.

If such speculation is inevitably a perilous business, it is obviously still more fanciful to imagine what Hume would have made of political disputes in our own era. However, it does not follow from this that we must see Hume as having nothing to contribute to these disputes. As I have said, he himself sought to reach generalizations that would, ideally, be valid at all times and in all places, and if we are to recognize him as an important political philosopher, it must be because we think that he has to some extent succeeded. Although scholars who work on Hume's political theory are generally agreed on this point—that his work can be mined for durable insights into political questions—there is no consensus about what specifically Hume has to offer to contemporary debates. Some interpreters have argued that the significance of his political theory lies in the fact that he offers no specifically normative claims at all. On this reading, Hume applies to politics a thorough-going naturalism consistent with his approach to metaphysics. We should see him (to use Hume's own analogy, justifying his approach to morality in the *Treatise*) as an “anatomist” rather than a “painter,” which is to say as someone who lays out systematically the sorts of motivations people have and the sorts of emotions and thought patterns that determine their behavior, rather than as someone who attempts to dictate the sort of ends they should have or the sort of society they should want (T 3.3.6.6/621; LET 1.32).<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars have found this naturalist reading difficult to square with the many passages in which Hume explicitly offers opinions and recommendations with regards to politics and law. Some scholars have read him differently—as a conservative philosopher whose ideas anticipate, in important ways, those of modern conservatives. Some, indeed, consider Hume to be the first great conservative philosopher. Naturally, our opinion on this matter depends heavily on how we define the term “conservative.” Hume is certainly conservative in one sense of this term. As we have seen, he prescribes extreme caution in attempting to change an established political system. He says: “in the general distribution of power among the several members of a constitution, there can seldom be admitted any other question, than What is established?” (HE 4.354). He thinks that even when reform is more limited, such that the basic constitutional structure of the nation is not threatened, we must proceed slowly and humbly (ESY 124). Describing Henry I's cautious approach to legal reform, he says: “All advances towards reason and good sense are slow and gradual” (HE 1.359; cf. ESY 116).

Hume's conservative interpreters want to attribute to him something stronger than a mere disposition toward caution, however. They argue that his epistemological skepticism provides the philosophical basis for rejecting certain basic principles of progressive

thought. Specifically, it leads us to rule out all forms of political rationalism and foundationalism. Rationalists and foundationalists are distinguished by their willingness to transform society according to abstract ideals of perfection or according to the supposed truth about human nature or human history. But, on this reading, no such ideals or truths can survive Hume's skeptical critique of various forms of "false philosophy." A Humean must reject the possibility of formulating, through rational reflection, any conception of the good society that departs dramatically from the actual practice of existing ones (Livingston 1984: 306–42). Those who read Hume in this way find support in comments such as that the "wise magistrate" bears in mind that "habits more than reason" are "in everything . . . the governing principle of mankind" (HE 3.116).

Many eighteenth-century radicals are certainly guilty of the sort of abstract, utopian thinking that Hume's conservative readers deplore. Such writers as Condorcet and Godwin believed that society should drastically reform or even do away with such institutions as the state and the family in order to liberate our "true" human nature. If we accept Hume's central epistemological claim—that we are so constituted as to be denied any direct insight into ultimate reality, including the reality about ourselves—it becomes difficult to defend many of the proposals made by these radicals. We can take as an example Godwin's claim that marriage is an "evil" that goes against our natural inclinations (1793: 850–1). As we see from the "Dialogue" that concludes the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morality*, Hume is alive to the great diversity of cultural practice, and so he would have little trouble accepting the idea that the institution of marriage, as practiced in Western European societies, is a cultural contrivance with no special basis in nature (EM 110–23/324–43). Nevertheless, a Humean could hardly accept the sudden abolition of this institution, which is rooted in the history and habits of the people, in the name of some more "pure" conception of human nature. If a practice is well-established and seems to serve a purpose, we cannot justify its sudden abolition, and we certainly cannot appeal, as Godwin does, to some special insight about what would constitute a more natural way of living.

Before we accept the label of "conservative" for Hume, however, we must consider two issues. First of all, we must ask whether contemporary progressives are guilty of the same sort of rationalism and utopianism that characterizes the thinking of eighteenth-century radicals such as Godwin. Donald Livingston (1994: 339), one of the scholars who sees Hume as anticipating modern conservatism, cites the philosophy of John Rawls as exemplifying the dependence of modern liberalism on radical foundationalist premises. Yet, at least in his later book *Political Liberalism*, Rawls (1996: 100) says that he considers his theory to depend only on "shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture"—which is to say, conceptions of liberty and equality that most members of a democratic society already accept. It is based, in other words, on beliefs and habits that are well established among citizens. Many feminists and advocates for racial equality would equally claim that their demands do not spring from any utopian ideal or radically revisionist conception of human nature, insisting instead that they simply want to see realized the liberal ideal of equal rights long recognized as basic to Western democracy. They would argue that it is impossible to mount a specifically skeptical challenge

to their program that does not also implicate this more basic ideal. And many liberals would argue that liberalism at its best entails, in fact, a kind of mitigated skepticism toward all forms of foundationalism because the project of a liberal society is precisely to establish a framework capable of accommodating a full diversity of views, foundational or otherwise. If we accept such a reading of modern liberalism, it begins to look very Humean.

Second, we must address Hume's own reformist program and, more specifically, his attitude toward what he called "superstition." If Hume's contemporaries were unsure how to classify him politically, in one respect they were agreed: he was a radical when it came to religion. Throughout his life, he bravely and tenaciously criticized what he termed the "prevailing systems of superstition," and, although he did not openly admit it, this clearly included nearly all accepted forms of Christianity (LET 2.451). This is despite the fact that the Christian faith was obviously deeply rooted in the habits of the people. Here, the contrast with Edmund Burke, perhaps the Enlightenment thinker most admired by modern conservatives, is revealing. Burke does not seem to have had passionate religious convictions of his own. Rather, he declared himself willing to accept whatever body of doctrine "seems to me to come best recommended by authority" (Burke 1889: 7.25). But he saw religion as a pillar supporting the authority of the state, and he saw a challenge to religious orthodoxy as tantamount to an attack on the established government. Given Hume's attacks on such orthodoxy, it is not surprising that Burke told James Boswell that "keeping company with David Hume, in a strict light is hardly defensible" (Boswell 1928–34: 6.268). If Hume really was a conservative of the sort scholars such as Livingston propose, we might expect him to take a line similar to Burke's on questions of religion. The views of the two men did share an important point in common. Hume thinks that, given the reality of people's faith in Christianity, a state church is the best way to channel this faith so as to prevent it becoming a threat to the social order. But he ultimately hopes people will abandon their religious beliefs more or less altogether. Hume's discussion of religious questions show that he is less concerned about deferring to established customs than he is about preserving social stability. The former often, but not always, serves as a means to the latter. When it comes to religion, the two can pull in opposite directions, and, in such cases, he feels no need to defer to even the most deeply rooted of social customs.<sup>3</sup>

The third main alternative reading has been to see Hume as a reformer, in tune with the overall progressive spirit of Enlightenment philosophy. His attacks on religion are read by (what we might call) his liberal interpreters as part of a broader assault on both popular prejudices and institutional structures that stand in the way of a better society: one that is marked by personal freedom, legal equality, limited state power, and open trade. These interpreters do not deny Hume's caution about reform. It is clear that he does not want to transform society precipitously, in such a way as might undermine its overall stability. However, they see him as ever watchful for opportunities to change it incrementally, according to his own normative ideal. The philosopher is well placed to bring about such incremental change, if not directly then by educating both the public and the legislators. He can show the iniquities that result from bad laws and bad

government, as well as provide models for good ones, and he can argue for the principles on which a good society should be based. And, on this reading, this is precisely what we see Hume doing in his political essays and in the *History*.<sup>4</sup>

## IV THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Hume is certainly a liberal in one sense of the term: he believes that government must allow people to form their own private conceptions of the good and give them the freedom to pursue these conceptions in the context of an open society and a free market. He is an early and important defender of this distinctively liberal vision of the state. Earlier in the century, Britain had witnessed a series of movements, endorsed by the monarchs William and Mary, to reform the manners of the people in the hopes of making them less materialistic and more public-spirited. Although these movements had little tangible success, both Christian moralist and civic republican authors continued during Hume's day to call on the state to promote virtue and discourage selfishness among citizens. Hume insists that all attempts by the state to reform the morals of the people are misguided. "All plans of government," he says, "which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary" (ESY 514). Such projects can only succeed by transforming our natural sentiments, which are simply too strong to be molded in this way. "Sovereigns must take mankind as they find them," he says, "and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of thinking" (ESY 260).

Hume here follows Bernard Mandeville who savagely mocks the movements for moral reform in his *Fable of the Bees*. Like Mandeville, Hume thinks that such "reformation" is not just hopeless; it is also unnecessary. He believes that society thrives through the selfish actions of its members. But Hume also breaks with Mandeville in an important way by arguing that a commercially thriving society will become, as a result of its economic development, not just a wealthier but also a more moral one. Comparing an inhabitant of feudal England to a modern resident of commercial society, Hume says that the latter is "a better man and a better citizen" than the former and that his life is a "more laudable" one (HE 3.76–7). This is because commerce, by fostering contacts between people, promotes sociability, and he thinks people become more benevolent and humanitarian as they broaden their range of social contacts beyond their immediate circle. The material rewards made available by commerce also act as an incentive to stimulate what Hume calls people's "industry" or, in other words, their desire to labor and improve their condition. This increase in industry in turn stimulates the sciences and the arts, which further heightens people's sense of "humanity" or general benevolence. By binding foreign nations together economically, more widespread commerce also makes for a more peaceful world.

Because commerce serves both the material and moral interests of the nation, Hume thinks the state should be prepared to do what it can to promote it. Its chief role lies in making laws to protect property. Without such laws, people will have no motive to work

to improve their lot, since they cannot be certain they will be able to realize the gains from their labor. Beyond this, however, the state must exercise caution in interfering with the market. Hume bears a general presumption in favor of free and open trade with minimal government interference. He details numerous instances throughout history where the state has damaged commerce by trying to manage it (HE 3.77; HE 3.330).

Reading Hume's attacks on government intervention in the economy, we might ascribe to him a minimalist view of the state overall. And, indeed, he seems to confirm this when he says that "we are . . . to look upon all the vast apparatus of our government, as having ultimately no other object or purpose but the distribution of justice" (ESY 37). However, he makes it clear that he is not simply advocating *laissez faire*. He says elsewhere that the "execution of justice, though the principal, is *not* the only advantage of government" (T 3.2.7.7/537; emphasis added). Rather, he says that "government extends further its beneficial influence; and, not contented to protect men in those conventions they make for their mutual interest, it often obliges them to make such conventions, and forces them to seek their own advantage, by a concurrence in some common end or purpose" (T 3.2.7.8/538).

To defend this claim, Hume makes an argument familiar in modern public economics: that the state can play a role in addressing market failures, where a project would benefit everyone but is not pursued due to the difficulty of coordinating common action and the disincentive effects created by the fear of free-riding. Using the example of draining a common meadow, he says:

'Tis very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons should agree in any such action, it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design, and still more difficult for them to execute it; while each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expence, and would lay the whole burden on others.

To address such market failures and promote the greater good, Hume envisions public-spirited magistrates engaging in ambitious programs of public works. He says that through the intervention of such public officials:

Bridges are built, harbors opened, ramparts raised, canals formed, fleets equipped, and armies disciplined, every where, by the care of government, which, though composed of men subject to all human infirmities, becomes, by one of the finest and most subtle inventions imaginable, a composition which is in some measure exempted from all these infirmities. (T 3.2.7.8/538–9)

Hume does not provide a detailed program for state action, although he does make a number of somewhat ad hoc proposals. He calls the aiding of "beggars and vagrants" "one of the circumstances in government, which humanity would most powerfully recommend to a benevolent legislator," and he gives the state a role in alleviating the condition of the poor in times of scarcity by addressing shortages in food distribution (HE 3.331). He says that when people are facing hunger, even when this does not reach the

level of what he calls “urgent necessity,” public officials may “[open] granaries, without consent of proprietors; as justly supposing that the authority of magistracy may, consistent with equity, extend so far” (EM 3.1.8/15). In discussing James’s reign, Hume says that his general bias against monopoly allows for an “exception in favour of new inventions”—thus permitting, in modern terms, protection for infant industries (HE 5.231). And, notwithstanding his view that people should be free to choose their professions, Hume also thinks the state can take a role in guiding people into particular professions where these provide services in the national interest (HE 3.135).

In light of these various examples, we can see that Hume takes a pragmatic approach to the question of how the state should manage its relationship to the free market. It can normally promote commerce very successfully merely by establishing a system of equitable laws. However, governors must be willing to intervene more directly when they believe they can do so effectively, either to promote prosperity or for other reasons of clear public interest. But Hume does place a constraint on public action. He believes that the state should create incentives to encourage people to behave in the desired way, rather than coerce them into doing so or try to reshape their character to give them the right sorts of motives.

We can see evidence for Hume’s aversion to coercive measures in his discussion of the state’s role in religious matters. Despite his concerns about the often-pernicious effects of religious faith, he is nevertheless reluctant to prescribe outright persecution. He thinks such persecution is inherently “iniquitous”; it is also unlikely to be effective (HE 4.123; HE 6.324). He says that it “serves only to make men more obstinate in their persuasion, and to encrease the number of their proselytes” (HE 3.432–3). He argues that a wise magistrate will see fit to intervene in matters of faith only when religious leaders are preaching outright sedition and when that magistrate thinks that a campaign of suppression can succeed. Such a campaign must not risk causing greater disorder than is likely to result from simply tolerating the dissenting views (HE 3.356–7).<sup>5</sup>

In place of suppression and persecution, Hume offers what he thinks is a more lasting solution to the perpetual risk of disorder caused by religious faction: a “fixed establishment” that would place priests under some form of single ecclesiastical structure, with salaries paid from the public purse (HE 3.136). This solution earned him the consternation of Smith and other Whigs, who wanted to see a greater separation of church and state. Hume supports an ecclesiastical establishment for two chief reasons. First of all, it prevents the churches from existing as parallel authorities to the state, with the capacity to undermine its edicts (HE 1.311). Second, when the clergy draw a salary from the state, they are thus its dependents—and this dependency tends to cool their passions because they no longer need to compete for followers. This is not to say that Hume think the state should monopolize religious opinion or repress competing visions. As he puts it, it should not “settle an entire uniformity of opinion” on its subjects (HE 3.432). On the contrary, he says that once the state has ensured that none of the disputants’ views overtly threaten the social order, it should quit the field of



theology entirely, lest its attempts at imposing any particular set of views itself disrupt social peace.

Hume suggests in his “Perfect Commonwealth” that the Scottish national church provides a model for the ideal ecclesiastical establishment (ESY 520). Scholars have doubted Hume’s seriousness here, and, in any case, he is willing to concede that the Church of England has much to recommend it. It possesses enough ceremony to “allure, and amuse, and engage the vulgar . . . without distracting men of more refined apprehensions” (HE 4.122–3). Also, it has normally taken a moderate, tolerant approach to dissenting views (HE 4.119).

## V CONCLUSION

During the decades following his death, Hume’s views on political questions were widely read and discussed. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to his standing is the vehemence with which people such as Thomas Jefferson posthumously attacked him. Objecting to what he saw as Hume’s assaults on the true principles of liberty, Jefferson called him “this degenerate son of science, this traitor to his fellow men” (1903–4: 16.44). In our time, however, Hume’s place in the canon of political philosophy is by no means secure. He has arguably fallen victim to the sheer diversity of his insights into political questions, as well as to his failure to bring these all together into a single systematic treatise. It is difficult to hold him up as a paradigmatic representative of any school of thought or to identify specific texts that concisely encapsulate the full range of his views. However, this chapter has attempted to show that many of his insights are original and important and that they should be of interest to readers today—even if their implications for contemporary problems must continue to be debated.

### ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS CITED

- EM *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- ESY *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Revised edition by E. F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985.
- HE *The History of England*. 6 Vols. Foreword by W. B. Todd. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983.
- LET *The Letters of David Hume*. 2 Vols. Edited by J. Y. T. Greig. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.
- T *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by D. F. Norton & M. J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

## NOTES

1. See also ESY 489, HE 4.355.
2. See Hardin (2007: 7–15).
3. See HE 5.526, and HE 5.121, for instance, on its effects during the civil war period.
4. See Stewart (1992), McArthur (2007).
5. See Sabl (2009).

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