

David Hume

Edited by
Knud Haakonssen and
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International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political
Thought

David Hume

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Series Preface

The International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political Thought brings together collections of important essays dealing with the work of major figures in the history of social and political thought. The aim is to make accessible the complete text with the original pagination of those essays that should be read by all scholars working in that field. In each case, the selection is made from the extensive available literature by an established expert who has a keen sense of the continuing relevance of the history of social and political thought for contemporary theory and practice. The selection is made on the basis of the quality and enduring significance of the essays in question. Every volume has an introduction that places the selection made in the context of the wider literature, the historical period, the contemporary state of scholarship and the editor's particular interests.

TOM CAMPBELL

Series Editor

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Introduction

The literature on Hume, including that devoted to his social and political thought, is now so extensive and so widely varied in character that even a generous collection such as the present cannot hope to be properly representative. It must either limit itself to some subfield or subgenre, or it must proceed by sampling. We have chosen the latter path, picking essays with quite different approaches and addressing a variety of themes in Hume's works. Similarly the collection is opportunistic in combining classic essays from the 1970s with recent work by scholars up to 2007. The collection is systematically organized only in the minimal sense that two general essays (James Moore's 'Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition' (Chapter 1) and Richard Dees' 'Hume and the Contexts of Politics' (Chapter 2)) are followed by a part on Hume's politics in various contexts, including statements of the Ciceronian and other sources of his political ideas and their development by figures such as James Madison, and a further part of more text-analytical essays that focus on Hume's political theory in the narrower sense, especially his central ideas of obligation, interest, natural and artificial virtue, justice, contract and so on.

What the essays share is a recognition that Hume was striving to enlighten his contemporaries, not in the positive sense of leading people to embrace new ideas, which Hume had little faith in because, as he put it in the third book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, 'the opposite passions of men impel them in contrary directions', but rather in the negative sense of shattering the idols, especially those of religion. Superstition was one of the most important terms in the Humean lexicon and combating superstition a singular theme giving meaning to Hume's sense of what he was doing as a political author. When considering his life in the round it was superstition that Hume returned to on what he recognized to be his deathbed, in early August 1776, when his close friend Adam Smith reported that Hume had been reading Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, and therefore to have contemplated reasons that might be given to Charon to delay being ferried across the river Styx. Hume felt that he would receive little sympathy for an argument that he was correcting his works for a new edition. He might then, he speculated, be forced to make a final plea to Charon, 'I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public' and 'if I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition'. Hume imagined Charon exclaiming 'that will not happen these many hundred years ... get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue'.¹ Smith's account of Hume's ultimately tranquil death, free from religious sacrament yet 'in such a happy composure of mind', confirmed Hume's hostility towards the greatest form of superstition, that which had or could become a 'prevailing system' – that is, be established. As if to confirm Hume's view, Smith later noted that his short account of Hume's demise brought more opprobrium upon him than anything else he ever wrote; such was the ferocity of those who perceived themselves to be defending the Christian faith against perceived heretics and deists or even atheists.²

¹ Adam Smith to William Strahan, 9 November 1776, in Hume (1987, pp. xlv–xlvi).

² Smith to Andreas Holt, 26 October 1780, in Mossner and Simpson Ross (1987, p. 251).

Hume's jocular comment about contemporary superstition was not, however, confined in his published writings to religious belief. Hume had an ear for what might be revealed to be superstition in every sphere of life, and charted its association with various assumptions about politics, philosophy, international relations and the modern rage for commerce in all of his published writings, and more particularly in successive editions of his *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* from 1741. Hume's foundational assumptions about the modern politics and its relationship to the commercial world were spelled out in the first edition of the *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, in the essay 'Of Liberty and Despotism', a title that was changed to 'Of Civil Liberty' in editions from 1758. It was here that Hume claimed that something new in philosophy could be charted from the seventeenth century onwards, because hitherto 'trade was never esteemed an affair of state'. Hume noted that Xenophon mentioned trade but doubted 'if it be of advantage to a state', Plato 'totally excludes it from his imaginary republic' and in more recent centuries 'even the Italians [of the Renaissance period] have kept a profound silence with regard to it'. More recently, by contrast, trade had become 'the chief attention, as well of ministers of state, as of speculative reasoners'. The cause of the new obsession with trade was clear to Hume: 'the great opulence, grandeur, and military achievements of the two maritime powers seem first to have instructed mankind in the importance of an extensive commerce'. Hume's contention was that the superstition that dogged the subject of commerce needed to be identified, if possible extinguished, and, at the very least, denounced. In the essay 'Of Luxury' of 1752, which became 'Of Refinement in the Arts' in editions of the *Essays* from 1760, Hume argued that unthinking condemnation of luxury was one of the great superstitions of the age.

It is significant that Hume went on, in 'Of Liberty and Despotism', to compare the condition of the maritime states, Britain and Holland, with France. He concluded that France, 'the most perfect model of pure monarchy', and other monarchies of Europe, were becoming 'civilized monarchies', because 'they are a government of laws, not of men'. Hume's point was that property was secure in such monarchies, industry was encouraged and arts of all kinds were flourishing, so that 'the prince lives secure among his subjects, like a father among his children'. France was, however, unlikely to develop as a trading power to the extent of any of the free states of Europe, because absolute government rested upon the subordination of ranks, and this ensured that 'birth, titles and place must be honoured above industry and riches'. This ensured that traders would sooner or later use their wealth to become landed aristocrats. Despite such tendencies, Hume's great prediction was that absolute monarchies like France, and mixed or republican polities like Holland and Britain, would become more alike in future times. This was due to the fact that a source of improvement in monarchies like France lay in the reform of the system of taxation, which could be levied so as to make agriculture thrive, which in turn would boost trade. By contrast, free states like Britain faced the prospect of degeneration because of the dangers associated with contracting debt, and of relying upon public credit to fund wars.

While absolute monarchs could declare a bankruptcy, and ruin the financiers who had lent them money, free states did not have this option, as 'the people, and chiefly those who have the highest offices' are 'commonly the public creditors' themselves.³ Hume feared the

³ Haakonssen, Knud (1994) *David Hume, Political Essays*, Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, pp. 51–8.

consequences in Britain's mixed government and advised frugality with regard to public expenditure. In Hume's eyes, the issue of commerce was connected to the domestic health of a state. Furthermore, it could not be separated from international relations because the extent of national commerce was directly related to the capacity of a state to wage war. Comparative analysis of the condition of states became key to the study of commerce and to the study of politics.

Hume's perspective interested contemporaries because of the widespread perception that Europe was on the edge of a precipice at the bottom of which was a return to a new dark age. In a century of near-constant war contemporaries became obsessed by the question of whether the modern world would follow its ancient counterpart and replay the old cycle of decline and fall. One reason for this idea was simply a recurrence of the luxury and inequality that was commonly viewed as having brought down Rome, raising the 'social question' of how to resolve antagonism between rich and poor. In addition, perceptions of imminent crisis and widespread uncertainty about the future were traceable to the financial instruments available to modern states, and particularly to the evolution of public credit, which was deemed to be a Janus-faced force for good or for evil. Like Hume, many eighteenth-century observers focused upon the likely negative effects of national debts. The standing armies funded by credit were expected to lead to the tyrannical rule of new Caesars. Bankruptcy caused by excessive credit was associated with popular rebellion headed by a latter-day Spartacus. Perhaps the most feared possibility was voluntary bankruptcy, whereby a monarch expanded credit to strengthen the military capacities of his or her state, then sacrificed the creditors in the name of national survival or imperial glory, creating a potentially all-powerful polity inimical to liberty and addicted to war. As the century wore on, and the global war for international supremacy between Britain and France intensified, the concomitant rise in national debts was held by many to presage Armageddon.

However unrealistic such nightmare scenarios might appear in hindsight, every speculator about eighteenth-century politics accepted that adding a debt to a state had important consequences both for the relationship between state and citizen and for relationships between competing states. In an era of experiment with representative government and more general constitutionalism, one danger commonly identified was that the imperative of paying the national debt would lead wealthy creditors to control politicians and statesmen. Alternatively, high taxes would beggar the populace, or at the very least reduce commercial competitiveness, making rich states prey to their poorer neighbours. If the existence of certain institutional hierarchies kept creditors content, public debts could pay lip service to constitutionalism and create an authoritarian fiscal-military state on the foundations of representative government. As Hume grew older these fears were expressed with ever-greater conviction. The deadly consequences of unintended national bankruptcy, or monarch-inspired planned bankruptcy, for the 'princes and states fighting and quarrelling amidst their debts, funds and public mortgages' were likened by Hume to a cudgelling match in a china shop in his essay 'Of Public Credit'. All of these issues are explored from different directions in the following essays.

It is fitting that the collection begins with James Moore's 'Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition' (Chapter 1) because this essay, alongside the work of Duncan Forbes, whose 'The European or Cosmopolitan Dimension in Hume's Science of Politics' (Chapter 9) is also included, encouraged scholars to place Hume in a more precise intellectual context. Moore argues that Hume's political writings amounted to a watershed

moment, because Hume was self-consciously working out what ought to be maintained from the classical republics of Greece and Rome in the modern world, the ways in which ideas about justice had to be adapted to the complex circumstances of commercial societies and the extent to which specific ideas associated with the Roman statesman and orator Cicero continued to be useful to contemporary politics. Moore deals with the Ciceronian legacy and its use by Hume and by Francis Hutcheson in 'Utility and Humanity: The Quest for the *Honestum* in Cicero, Hutcheson, and Hume' (Chapter 12), also included here, but in 'Hume's Political Science' Moore is most concerned with Hume's engagement with contemporary republican thought, especially as expressed by James Harrington and by Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke. Republican ideas were relevant in eighteenth-century Britain in part because of the events of the seventeenth century, but more so because many considered the mixed government established in England during the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 to be as close to a republic as was practicable in large commercial polities. One question was whether in being a type of republic Britain would follow the Machiavellian prescription of seeking 'an empire for increase', and the inevitable death of the state that followed. Moore reveals Hume's engagement with Machiavelli, with the Harringtonian attempt to create a republic that would survive indefinitely, and with Bolingbroke's jeremiad critique of Britain for lacking proper republican institutions. The Hume who emerges was an innovator exactly because he rejected traditional perspectives upon politics. Britain was a flawed state, but many of the flaws contributed to its survival, and in many respects it was superior as a polity to the republics ancient and modern that attracted so much comment. This was also the case, Moore shows, with regard to Hume's ideas about property ('Hume's Theory of Justice and Property', Chapter 14), which influenced Adam Smith and others so greatly, in refuting the claim that forms of distributive justice, characterizing egalitarian societies in history, ought to inspire contemporary law or policy.

Richard Dees' 'Hume and the Contexts of Politics' (Chapter 2) reminds readers of the necessity of including Hume's historical writings alongside his political essays, emphasizing the extent to which Hume was sceptical of political generalizations pretending to have universal import. Indeed, Hume along with Montesquieu did more than any other author to convince contemporaries that if politics was a science it was a science of particular cases. History offered all manner of states; small and large, Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, agrarian and commercial, monarchical and republican. And a 'scientific' approach showed that while there was a natural core to all human passions and the interests, they were shaped by local factors, by geography and, above all, by historical events. What worked in France would not necessarily work in Britain, and was certain not to function similarly in North America, because of the gulf in circumstances, experiences and difficulties. It was this kind of understanding that was required when facing difficult questions, such as the legitimacy of the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. Dees argues that Hume's perspective on rebellion, so important in the new foundations for the British polity with monarchs whose legitimacy continued to be challenged, derived from his reading of history and his understanding of the specific circumstances that Britons found themselves in.

If Hume's science of human affairs was at its most persuasive and subtle in dealing with the political culture of complicated modern societies, such as Britain and France, it was at its most problematic when faced with the truly alien. As Aaron Garrett explains in 'Hume's "Original Difference": Race, National Character and the Human Sciences' (Chapter 13), Hume's sharp distinction between natural and moral causes made it impossible for him to

deal with human life forms that did not exhibit the moral causality that he was acquainted with from his (European) cultural perspective. This is brought out most clearly in the specific and sensitive case of Hume's discussion of non-white peoples, as Garrett argues.

Hume's more systematic approach to the problem of political obligation is explored in Rachel Cohon's, 'The Shackles of Virtue: Hume on Allegiance to Government' (Chapter 22), which charts Hume's view of the origin of government and the relationship between his ideas about allegiance and virtue in the *Treatise* and in later essays. Cohon's essay can usefully be read alongside Stephen Buckle's and Dario Castiglione's 'Hume's Critique of the Contract Theory' (Chapter 23), which explains why Hume was so dissatisfied with John Locke's idea of tacit consent as a basis for obligation and was fearful that it would make acts of rebellion more regular at the same time as it made subjects more dissatisfied with their lot. Hume's worry was that from a Lockean perspective, 'the subjects have tacitly reserved the power of resisting their sovereign, whenever they find themselves aggrieved by that authority, with which they have, for certain purposes, voluntarily entrusted him' (p. 479). The implications of Hume's view is made clear in Mark G. Spencer's 'Hume and Madison on Faction' (Chapter 5), which revises Douglass Adair's view of Hume's influence upon the *Federalist Papers* by explaining the extent of Madison's debt to Hume's political and historical writings, and especially Hume's *History of England*. In all of these essays the Hume that authors responded to was not a narrow student of politics but rather had formulated a sophisticated portrait of the contemporary world and its likely future, which had to be engaged with to the fullest extent.

Hume's continuing concern with the possibility of the collapse of the British state and the increasing seriousness with which he viewed the threats to all modern states bring us to the old question whether or in what sense Hume was a conservative. The debate between Donald Livingston ('David Hume and the Conservative Tradition', Chapter 3) and John Stewart ('The Public Interest vs. Old Rights', Chapter 4) supplies statements of the cases for and against, with Livingston the advocate of the conservative Hume on the grounds that Hume was the first philosopher to ground conservatism philosophically, upon habit, custom, convention, prejudice and common life, and in tune with this claimed that aspirations to a perfectible society were altogether utopian. Hume's emphasis upon history, historical contingency and the foolishness of rationally planned reform, all make him a more important figure in the conservative tradition than Edmund Burke in Livingston's eyes, because Burke's attack upon political innovation was marred by rhetorical excess. By contrast, Stewart argues that Hume, from the first essays in 1741 defending Robert Walpole against accusations of villainy, and through his close links with the supporters of Walpole in Scotland such as Archibald Stewart and James Oswald, supported the many ministers of the crown who aspired to limit the powers of the monarch, to widen the franchise, and to limit the authority of bishops and landowners. In his economic and religious philosophy Hume was a reformer, Stewart suggests, increasingly aware that the latent barbarism within the British polity was becoming manifest, making the day to day politics of the country dangerous as well as ridiculous.

Hume's distinction between barbarism and civilization, also used by Stewart, is exhaustively traced in Neil McArthur's essay, 'Laws Not Men: Hume's Distinction between Barbarous and Civilized Government' (Chapter 10), which underscores Hume's support for politics governed by laws that stood above the influence of those who made them, and did not depend upon the character of those who were responsible for putting them into practice. McArthur's second essay in this collection, 'David Hume and the Common Law of England', presents Hume as

an enemy of the common lawyers who evaluated law by reference to its antiquity. Hume was fearful of justifications of law that rested upon history rather than utility, in the sense of the generality and equity of the law. In consequence Hume was, on McArthur's reading, what Duncan Forbes had called a scientific Whig rather than a vulgar Whig.

One of the most prominent themes in recent Hume scholarship is his interest in the advantages and disadvantages of modern commercial society. In Istvan Hont's (2005, pp. 1–155) reading Hume deserves to be studied today because he recognized, against Marx, that politics could never be replaced by economics, and equally, against Hobbes, that economics had always to be a part of political theorizing. In 'Hume, Modern Patriotism, and Commercial Society' (Chapter 8) Annie Stilz adheres to Hont's viewpoint, seeking to recover the depth of Hume's politics against those, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, who have presented Hume as a sceptic and atheist advocating a politics of self-interest. Stilz, by contrast, claims that the social ties that Hume identified in the commercial society he lived in, founded on imperfect morals, laws and customs, were nevertheless a sufficient basis for forms of patriotism that accurately describe our own world. Carl Wennerlind, in 'David Hume's Political Philosophy: A Theory of Commercial Modernization' (Chapter 7), shares this approach in presenting a Hume whose politics explicitly supported commercial modernization, entailing the recognition that the middling sort of society, the industrious individuals who enjoyed moderate wealth and neither riches nor poverty, were the foundation of trade and ought equally to play a greater role in civic life. The Hume who emerges was an iconoclast with regard to commercial policy, an enemy to the sinister interests that prevailed in political and economic life, most evidently in what Smith famously termed 'the mercantile system' in his *Wealth of Nations*.

Hume's obsession with the play of passion and interest, and their origin in nature or artifice, was at the core of Hume's political philosophy. In 'Hume's Account of Social Artifice – Its Origins and Originality' (Chapter 16) Annette Baier supplies an overview of Hume's distinctiveness, by comparison with the work of Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf, and a reading of Hume's fascination with the natural family as the source of social conventions, and ultimately laws and duties, and of his opposition to excessive paternal authority, which he saw mirrored in the authority of priests in his own day. David Gauthier ('Artificial Virtues and the Sensible Knave', Chapter 17) challenges Baier's account of Hume's view of the foundation of morals, emphasizing Hume's scepticism through an analysis of the figure of the sensible knave and his challenging questions in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Baier's response ('Artificial Virtues and Equally Sensible Non-Knaves: A Response to Gauthier', Chapter 18) is that Hume took the sceptical challenge of the Hobbist seriously in questions of justice, fidelity and allegiance but supplied a richer account of the origins of the virtues, and argued that 'meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity' (p. 356) arose naturally from human intercourse. This was the basis for a sociability within which the non-natural virtues, including good manners and the respect for peace, could arise and be supported because of the shared social interest in adhering to them. Jeffrey Church's 'Selfish and Moral Politics: David Hume on Stability and Cohesion in the Modern State' (Chapter 6) supports Baier's position in emphasizing the difference between Hume and the contemporary Hobbist, Bernard Mandeville; for Hume, in Church's reading, selfish passions could be channelled to socially beneficent ends, and the major goal of political philosophy was to reveal how to do exactly this.

These concerns of Hume's with what was natural and what artificial in morals and politics have been the subject of intensive debates about his metaphysics and epistemology. These debates are represented in several essays in this collection, but there is especially a line of discussion from Knud Haakonssen's early 'Hume's Obligations' (Chapter 15) through the above-mentioned essays by Gauthier and Baier to Stephen Darwall's 'Motive and Obligation in Hume's Ethics' (Chapter 19), Jason Baldwin's 'Hume's Knave and the Interests of Justice' (Chapter 20) and Don Garrett's 'The First Motive to Justice: Hume's Circle Argument Squared' (Chapter 21). The central issue is the status of the artificial virtues – that is, those that in some way depend upon human conventions, and which are typified mainly by justice: how can justice be a moral virtue that we have an obligation to have? In order to fulfil his naturalistic account of morals and politics, it is generally agreed that Hume must show that there are non-moral motives for virtuous behaviour – that is, for actions that we accept as evidence of those characteristics in a person that we call virtues. In the case of natural virtues, such as meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency and moderation, this is not a problem; we spontaneously like their presence and hate their absence in ourselves and others, and these natural reactions provide us with reasons for considering such personality traits virtuous. This aspect of our lives provides a natural basis for small-scale sociability. But with those virtues that relate to conventional and institutionalized practices, rules and so on, there is no such immediate motivation, says Hume, and consequently their moral status, or obligatoriness, is a *prima facie* problem. Since the artificial virtue of justice is the key to social organization beyond the familial society, the problem is at the heart of Hume's political theory. But how to understand his solution has proved contentious.

Haakonssen's attempt at reconstruction in 'Hume's Obligations' is premised on the Scot's concern with character and argues that obligation is a sentiment that arises from the perception of the need to maintain one's character: natural obligation to the basic character constituted by the natural virtues, artificial obligation to the character that has been conventionally 'extended' (for example to owner of property or holder of contract).⁴ Gauthier takes a more radical way out, as indicated, arguing that Hume's point is that there is no such thing as a moral obligation to justice, while Baier searches for and finds a reading of Hume's notion of self-interest that will make it serve as the non-moral motive for justice. The key here is that self-interest is redirected towards just behaviour when there is security that others will follow suit. In their very detailed analyses, Darwall and Garrett focus on the rule-bound character of justice, in each their different way suggesting that rules of justice, once introduced into the moral life of the human species, engender their own particular inclination to rule following, and that this is the non-moral motive that Hume's theory needs. However, Darwall denies and Garrett maintains that Hume's theory consistently can harbour such a motive.⁵

The final essays underline the extent to which Hume's notion of enlightenment remains as Hume anticipated it would always be: endlessly contested and often-times misunderstood.

⁴ Most of the later contributions to the discussion, including the ones reprinted here, refer to a brief version of the argument in Haakonssen (1981, p. 34ff.). We print an earlier and more detailed argument.

⁵ In an essay that appeared too late for inclusion in the present collection, James Harris (2010) breaks entirely with the long line of debate represented here, arguing that in the case of justice Hume's supposedly fundamental doctrine, that moral judgement is about motives, does not apply, and that the moral status of justice is based not on appreciation of its motive, but upon its consequences.

Hume's iconoclastic impulses were informed not only by a historical recognition that unintended consequences played a major role in human endeavours, but also that the individual mind rarely perceived itself rationally, and accordingly acted in uncertain ways near-impossible to predict or to guide. Yet it was exactly the guiding of humanity that Hume set himself in his social and political writings. The depth of Hume's insight and vision continues to inspire philosophers and historians: he remains an author who generates controversy and commentary, and perhaps this would have pleased him above all else. If this collection persuades students, scholars and more general readers to open Hume's books after viewing such commentaries as are included here then the editors will have succeeded in their task.

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Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition*

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I

Hume's political thought, no less than his epistemology, his ethics and his historical work, stands at a turning point in eighteenth-century thought. And the best means of locating his intentions and of grasping the significance of his political writings may be to examine them in the context of the political thinkers to whom he has responded and the thinkers who were in turn provoked by him. Hume, it should not be forgotten, was always a voracious reader. "I was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life and the great source of my enjoyments," he has told us.¹ And he once remarked that a wife was not one "of the indispensable requisites of life. Books? That is one of them; and I have more than I can use."² The remarkable range of his reading is reflected in the variety of contexts in which his social and political thinking might be located.

His theory of justice and property forms one of the crucial links in the transition from the emphasis on natural law and Roman jurisprudence in the teaching of law in the Scottish universities in the early decades of the eighteenth century to the theoretical or natural history approaches of the various members of the Scottish enlightenment in the second half of the century. His criticisms of the speculative principles of the Whig and the Tory parties, the principles of the original contract and of passive obedience, were equally indispensable in the displacement of those traditional theories of English government and society by the

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1 "My Own Life," in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1954), 611.

2 Letter to John Clephane, January 1953, in J. Y. T. Grieg (ed.), *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol. 1, 170.

radically different approach to law and politics initiated by Bentham and the English utilitarians.

But there is another context of political speculation which may bear more directly on Hume's intentions as a political scientist as revealed in his *Essays, Moral and Political* and in his *Political Discourses*. It is his response to a tradition of political speculation which included, as he once said, "some of the greatest geniuses of the nation."³ They included Bolingbroke and his associates, John Toland, Andrew Fletcher, Algernon Sidney and many others. The tradition to which they belonged has been characterized as the tradition of the English commonwealthman;⁴ or following the names of its greatest proponents, as neo-Harringtonianism,⁵ and as one of the English faces of Machiavelli.⁶ But it is still perhaps most familiar to us, following Zera Fink, as the classical republican tradition.⁷ It will be the gravamen of my argument in this paper that Hume's political science can best be understood as an elaborate response to the political science of the classical republicans. And I will further suggest that for experimental political scientists, at least, the classical republican tradition comes to an end with the political science of Hume.

II

In the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume characterized the study of politics as the science of men "united in society and dependent on each other." The science of politics, along with the sciences of logic, morals and criticism, seemed to him to comprise almost everything of importance in the study of human affairs. But of the four

- 3 David Hume, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Philosophical Works*, ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), vol. 3, 108; hereinafter referred to as *Works*.
- 4 Caroline Robbins, *The English Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).
- 5 J. G. A. Pocock, "Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century," in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 104-47.
- 6 Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
- 7 Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1945). It will be clear from the sequel that my understanding of the classical tradition, derived in part from my reading of the authors cited above, differs in certain respects from what Duncan Forbes has called "vulgar Whiggism" in his recent and valuable book, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). The reader may also profitably consult earlier books on Hume's political thought by John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963); Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Hume politico e storico* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1962); and Georges Vlachos, *Essai sur la politique de Hume* (Paris: Domat Montchretien, 1955).

La science politique de Hume et la tradition républicaine classique

La science politique de Hume marque un point tournant dans l'histoire de la pensée politique. On peut mieux apprécier sa signification si on la considère comme une réponse structurée aux essais de construction d'une science politique fondée sur l'expérience tentés par les théoriciens de la tradition républicaine classique. Sa discussion des formes de gouvernement, du régime mixte en Grande Bretagne, du rôle des législateurs, de l'influence du gouvernement sur le comportement social, des sources de la puissance militaire, de la sagesse d'acquiescer des colonies, des mérites de la politique de la Grèce et de Rome dans l'Antiquité, et en dernier lieu, sa conception d'une république parfaite, tous ces thèmes font partie d'une réponse systématique aux oeuvres de Machiavel, Harrington, Bolingbroke et autres. La conception de Hume du gouvernement constitutionnel dérive d'une application plus consistante du raisonnement expérimental au domaine politique. Sa science politique offre donc une nouvelle théorie du gouvernement républicain qui a eu une profonde influence sur les penseurs américains, notamment Hamilton et Madison. Ces derniers y trouvèrent une conception du politique qui pouvait être appliquée aux grandes sociétés mercantiles.

rudimentary sciences of human nature, morals and criticism came to be regarded by him as belonging more to the realm of taste and feeling than to the scientific world of the understanding. He entertained no such reservations, however, about politics, which remained for him an experimental science, comparable with the natural sciences in the scope or object of its investigation. "The sciences, which treat of general facts," he said in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "are politics, natural philosophy, physics and chemistry, etc. where the qualities, causes and effects of a whole species of objects are enquired into."⁸ In classifying politics with the natural sciences, Hume was not suggesting that politics was a science capable of demonstration or quantification. He meant rather that political science was a science which must be based, like physics or chemistry, on observation and experiment, on the impressions and ideas of the senses. And, as in the natural sciences, the object of political science was the discovery of general truths, or generalizations substantiated by observation and experiment.

There were, to be sure, certain difficulties in formulating generalizations in political science. There was first of all the unpredictability or contingency of political conduct, not just of particular political actions, but of whole areas or realms of public affairs.⁹ There was also the peculiar susceptibility of political life to radical, often violent changes. How was generalization possible about public affairs, when "whatever

8 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), Sect. III, Part III, 165; hereinafter referred to as *E.C.H.U.*

9 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 175-76.

anyone should advance on that head would, in all probability, be refuted by further experience. . . . Such mighty revolutions have happened in human affairs, and so many events have arisen contrary to the expectations of the ancients that they are sufficient to beget the suspicion of still further changes."¹⁰ The challenge for the political scientist was somehow to rescue his generalizations from a world characterized by the conditions of contingency and radical change. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume adumbrated certain rules which scientists should follow when they employ the experimental method.¹¹ It may be helpful to recall those rules in this connection and suggest how they might be applied to meet the special problems presented by the world of politics.

The first three rules of experimental method proposed by Hume were a highly condensed recapitulation of his understanding of the relation between a cause and an effect. The cause and the effect, he said, must be contiguous in space and time; the cause must be temporally prior to the effect; and there must be a constant conjunction of the two ideas in experience. The relevance of these rules for the political scientist was that they directed him to search for contiguities, regularities and constant conjunctions in political behaviour. However unpredictable or merely contingent political actions might appear, the political scientist might discover, in applying the rules of the experimental method to politics, the forms or conventions which permit regular or uniform behaviour in the public realm. The reduction of politics to a science meant, first of all, the discovery of the forms of constitutional behaviour.

Following this methodological canon, Hume proposed another which he called "the source of most of our philosophical reasonings."¹² This was the rule that to the same causes one must assign the same effects. This too was a principle of uniformity, but it represented another dimension of the uniformity of nature and the uniformity of human nature. In the sciences of physical nature, it referred to the resemblance of certain parts of nature to other parts, ". . . as to respiration in a man and in a beast; the descent of stones in Europe and in America; the light of our culinary fire and of the sun; the reflections of light in the earth, and in the planets."¹³ In the science of politics, the implication of this general rule was simply that human nature in different times and in different places must always be assumed to be the same. The assumption that human nature is uniform was not intended by Hume to preclude or expunge evidence of variety and change in human

10 "Of Civil Liberty," *Works*, vol. 3, 157.

11 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), Book I, Part III, Sect. IV, hereinafter referred to as *Treatise*.

12 *Ibid.*, 173.

13 Sir I. Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), 270.

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affairs.¹⁴ It was intended rather to suggest that if human nature remains the same at all times and in all places, then differences in human conduct must be explained in terms of those circumstances in which men differ;¹⁵ and those circumstances were nothing but the artificial or conventional arrangements of social and political life.

From the standpoint of the political scientist, then, the conventions and institutions of social and political life were to be regarded as experiments, as uncertain trials of judgment by which politicians have attempted to contrive a world consistent with the uniform needs and wants of human beings. "These records of wars, intrigues, factions and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals and external objects by the experiments which he makes concerning them."¹⁶ Because the political scientist perceives the efforts of politicians as experiments, it is understandable that the institutions and conventions of human life appear to him to manifest the widest possible variety of forms of government and styles of political conduct. But because it is the same human nature to which these experiments must be applied, their effectiveness or utility may be judged by their capacity to satisfy the uniform requirements of human nature. And thus men learn from the experience or the experiments of others. And a science of politics, conceived in the experimental manner, is a practical as well as a scientific activity. For if it is part of the vocation of an experimental political scientist to judge forms of government and policy in terms of their usefulness to human nature, then it is consistent with this role that the political scientist should also recommend certain forms of political life as more useful or effective than others, making due allowance for differences in social and political conditions, and for the claims upon the allegiance of subjects of the legal and governmental arrangements under which they happen to live.

III

This experimental approach to political science was not a wholly original one. Bolingbroke was firmly committed to the experimental method as the only means of achieving a reliable knowledge of nature: "... natural knowledge, the knowledge, I should say, of the system of nature, can never be real, unless it be begun, and carried on, by the painful drudgery of experiment," he said, in his rambling "Essays on the Nature,

14 Duncan Forbes offers some pertinent criticisms of the manner in which Hume's assumption of the uniformity of human nature has been misunderstood by some of his critics. See *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, chap. 4.

15 *Treatise*, Book I, Part III, Sect. IV, 174, particularly rule no. 6.

16 *E.C.H.U.*, Sect. VIII, Part I, 83-84.

Extent and Reality of Human Knowledge.”¹⁷ His insistence on the use of examples in historical writing was not designed to recommend specific models for the imitation of his readers; examples in history were rather like observations in natural philosophy; by collecting and arranging examples judiciously, the historian might arrive at a general knowledge of life and conduct conformable to the general nature of things. “He who studies history, as he would philosophy, will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience.”¹⁸ The difficulty with Bolingbroke’s approach considered as an experimental approach to natural and moral subjects was his introduction of a providential role for nature. For Bolingbroke did not confine his assumptions about nature to the Newtonian premises of simplicity and uniformity; he believed that final causes could be discovered by the experimental scientist and that “the more we proceed in the study of nature, under the conduct of experimental philosophy, the more discoveries we make and shall make of the infinite wisdom as well as power of its author.”¹⁹ This conception of nature as “a nurse and instructress,” as D. G. James described it,²⁰ who directs human reason to knowledge of the deity was something of an irrelevance for the experimental scientist; but it offered Bolingbroke grounds of sorts for his conviction that all study properly conducted must instruct the student in private and public virtue.

I have said perhaps already [he once said] but no matter, it cannot be repeated too often, that the drift of all philosophy and of all political speculations, ought to be the making us better men and better citizens. Those studies, which have no intention towards improving our moral character have no pretence to be styled philosophical.²¹

Whatever difficulties may be present in Bolingbroke’s philosophical writings, at least one source of confusion in those works must be his attempt to reconcile an experimental conception of human knowledge with the belief that experimental knowledge must lead to virtue. The assumption that the study of politics must be conducive to political virtue was, in Hume’s view, the great misconception of Bolingbroke’s political science. From an experimental or empirical standpoint that assumption could not be allowed to stand unchallenged.

17 *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (Philadelphia, 1841), vol. 3, 87.

18 “Letters on the Study and Use of History,” *ibid.*, vol. 2, 193.

19 “Essays on the Nature, Extent and Reality of Human Knowledge,” *ibid.*, vol. 3, 97.

20 D. G. James, *The Life of Reason: Hobbes, Locke and Bolingbroke* (London: Longmans, Green, 1949), 247, 211–12, 218.

21 “Letters on the Study and Use of History,” in *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke*, vol. 2, 211.

Whatever may be said of Bolingbroke's attempt to reconcile the experimental method with political virtue by way of a providential idea of nature, his understanding of the conditions which permitted the exercise of political virtue, and more specifically of the conditions which permitted political virtue in England, derived from a more consistently experimental or empirical thinker. The most immediate influence upon Bolingbroke's understanding of politics was the political theory of Harrington.

Now Harrington was also an experimental political scientist. The experiences of diverse forms of government were regarded by him as experiments which could be used to verify generalizations about public affairs. Thus his insistence that "no man can be a politician unless he be first an historian or a traveller; for . . . if he hath no knowledge in history he cannot tell what hath been; and if he hath not been a traveller, he cannot tell what is: but he that neither knoweth what hath been nor what is, can never tell what must be or what may be."²² His own generalizations about public affairs were based upon an impressive range of geographical and historical experience: the Greek cities, the Roman Republic, Israel in the era of the judges, the republics of Venice and Florence, the United Provinces of the Netherlands and the Commonwealth of England were all models of governments drawn from experience which served to substantiate his generalizations.²³ But, like Bolingbroke, Harrington retained certain assumptions about the object of a scientific enquiry which were alien to a strictly empirical or experimental approach. Specifically, he maintained that nature must consist of something material; and that a scientific explanation of any phenomenon must locate its cause in the unchanging matter of which the entity in question was made or formed.²⁴ In this respect his concept of nature

22 James Harrington, *Oceana and Other Works*, ed. by John Toland (Dublin, 1737), 183.

23 "Divers Models of Popular Government," in *ibid.*, 524-37.

24 "Valerius and Publicola," in *ibid.*, 494. See also W. H. Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism and Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), chap. 10, who acknowledges that, in Harrington's work, "the empirical method was rarely, if ever, employed in the most stringent fashion . . . the notion of what constitutes an empirical fact involved acceptance of matter we would reject . . ." (247). It may be a more satisfactory characterization of Harrington's scientific method to call him an "inductive materialist," notwithstanding the problems any attempt to fix his assumptions precisely must present. Certainly there was nothing mechanical in his idea of nature ("Prerogative of Popular Government," in *Oceana*, 265), and he explicitly disavowed any intention to "meddle with the mathematicians, an art I understand as little as mathematicians do this" (*ibid.*, 243). Toland's inclusion, in his edition of Harrington's works, of the murky and fragmentary thoughts written during his later illness ("The Mechanics of Nature," in *Oceana*, xlii-xliv), makes no contribution to a clarification of the problem. The fragments in any case are misnamed: insofar as any coherent idea of nature appears in the fragments it is an idea of a plastic nature: "a spirit, the same spirit of God which in the beginning moved upon the waters, his

remained Aristotelian inasmuch as he continued to distinguish material causes of government, from the formal, efficient and final causes of government.²⁵ But his basic distinction was between matter and form, which he liked to construe as the distinction between nature and art. It was on this basis that he rested the inductive generalization that the balance of power, which he called the art or form of government, inevitably followed the balance of property, that is, the nature or material of government.²⁶

One of the implications of the difference between Harrington's perspective and Hume's in this regard was their manner of explaining the crucial relationship between property ownership and power. Hume acknowledged the validity of Harrington's claim that power followed property; but he argued that the *locus* of the connection was in the beliefs or opinions of men, not in the material nature of things. Thus he considered that Harrington had mistaken a contingent connection for a necessary connection when he claimed that power necessarily followed property in the determination of the form of government. Power follows property, Hume maintained, only if the owners of property believe that they have a right to share in the exercise of government, and property owners entertain such an opinion only if they have been accustomed to take part in the activities of government.²⁷ In the absence of this foundation of power and authority in the opinions of men, property and power might remain unbalanced and even unconnected indefinitely. And a variety of other differences between Harrington and Hume followed from this basic distinction. But in addition to the notion of material causation and the other Aristotelian assumptions in Harrington's idea of nature, there was a still more significant intellectual force which shaped the manner in which both Harrington and Bolingbroke applied the experimental method to politics. This was the decisive influence of

plastic virtue, etc." On the other hand, an interpretation of the nature of things as material, allows one to interpret the nature of government as the material of government, and this seems to be most consistent with the centrality accorded the balance of property as the matter of government in his writings.

25 See the organization of topics in "A System of Politics," in *Oceana*, 496-514. The efficient cause of government is described by Harrington under the heading of administration or reason of state (512-14); the final cause of government is the preservation of the life of the commonwealth or its immortality. See also "The Prerogative of Popular Government," in *Oceana*, 266.

26 "Valerius and Publicola," in *Oceana*, 494:

"Publicola: . . . The materials of a government are as much in nature and as little in art, as the materials of a house. . . . Now so far as art is necessarily disposed by the nature of its foundation or materials, so far it is in art as in nature.

"Valerius: What call you the foundation or the materials of government?

"Publicola: That which I have long since proved and you granted, the balance, the distribution of property and the power thence naturally deriving."

27 "Of the First Principles of Government," in *Works*, vol. 3, 112.

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Machiavelli, whose understanding of politics provides the underlying orientation of the tradition of political thought which leads through Harrington to Bolingbroke.

Now although the matter has no doubt been overstated on occasion, Machiavelli may be interpreted as an experimental political scientist. More than many of his followers in the classical republican tradition, he was scrupulous to avoid final causes and discussion of the ends of life: he insisted rather that the student of politics must observe how men behave and not how they ought to behave.²⁸ He believed that however changeable and fluctuating human conduct might appear, the passions of men remain the same in all times and places.²⁹ His political science had a direct practical bearing in his insistence that the future must be shaped by experience or judgment based upon the examples of the past.³⁰ But however empirical his method may appear, there was a more fundamental concern in Machiavelli's political thought. This was his attempt to provide an understanding of politics unmodified by presuppositions or assumptions drawn from other aspects of human affairs. This attempt to characterize the distinctive nature of politics led him to formulate peculiarly political categories of the understanding.³¹ And those categories and assumptions about the nature of politics passed into the tradition of experimental political science in England, where, in a succession of writers from Harrington to Bolingbroke, the methods of experimental science were brought to bear upon a world whose nature was assumed to be the distinctive and autonomous world of politics disclosed by Machiavelli.

It was this set of assumptions and this tradition which ended for experimental political scientists with the political thought of Hume. Hume recognized that the assumptions about human nature which the experimental method required could not be reconciled with the understanding of politics so forcibly articulated in the work of Machiavelli. The experience on which Machiavelli had drawn was a limited experience. Hume wrote: "Machiavelli was certainly 'a great genius,' but having confined his study to the furious and tyrannical governments of ancient times, or to the little disorderly principalities of Italy, his reasonings especially upon monarchical governments have been found extremely defective; and there is scarcely any maxim in his *Prince* which subsequent experience has not entirely refuted."³² The modern experi-

28 Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Mentor Books, 1952), 84.

29 Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. and ed. by L. J. Walker (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), vol. 1, 216.

30 Leonardo Olschki, *Machiavelli: The Scientist* (Berkeley: The Gillick Press, 1945), 29ff., and L. J. Walker, "Introduction," in *The Discourses*, Sects. VI, VIII, IX. See Anthony Parel, "Machiavelli's Method and His Interpreters," in Anthony Parel (ed.), *The Political Calculus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

31 Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), 209ff.

32 "Of Civil Liberty," in *Works*, vol. 3, 156.

ence of constitutional government, in its monarchical as well as its other forms, afforded new evidence of the possibilities of regular or uniform behaviour in politics. Where Machiavelli had thought it necessary to respond to the unpredictable and changing phenomena of political life by action that was itself unpredictable and impetuous, Hume believed that a science of politics should be able to offer more uniform and more regular directives for political conduct. Implicit in his political science was a response to the challenges of *fortuna* as Machiavelli and the classical republicans had variously conceived it. His response embraced a wide range of political experience, in which it is possible to distinguish eight separate but connected themes.

IV

There was first of all his analysis of forms of government. The comparison of forms of government was considered by some of the most distinguished of Hume's contemporaries to be a pastime of doubtful utility to oneself and others. Pope's memorable advice to Bolingbroke epitomized this point of view: "For forms of government let fools contest; / whate'er is best administered is best."³³ There is no reason to suppose, however, that Bolingbroke heeded Pope's counsel in this matter; and Hume rejected it as well. Forms of government were irrelevant only if the government in question was an absolute government, where politicians were absolved from any obligation to adhere to standards of constitutional behaviour.³⁴ But absolute or unconstitutional governments were not to be identified with the simple or unmixed forms of government as the classical republicans believed. It was not the case, as Bolingbroke had said, that "absolute monarchy is tyranny, but absolute democracy is tyranny and anarchy both,"³⁵ for everything depended on the manner in which monarchies, aristocracies and democracies were constituted. The classical tradition had mistaken the strengths and the weaknesses of the simple forms of government, and this was responsible for their diffidence concerning the possibility of constitutional behaviour in the simple or unmixed forms of government.

The merit of democratic government was not that it permitted citizens to participate in public affairs by casting their votes for or against proposed legislation as in the Roman Republic. The constitutional provision for popular power in Rome was the principal blunder of the founders of the Republic, in Hume's view.³⁶ For the citizens of the Republic proved to be vulnerable to corruption, which was to be expected among members of a legislature, and was not in itself problema-

33 Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. by Maynard Mack (London: Methuen, 1950), 123-24.

34 "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Works*, vol. 3, 98-99.

35 *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke*, vol. 2, 120.

36 "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Works*, vol. 3, 99-100.

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tic. The difficulty in ancient Rome was one of scale: the number of politicians in need of offices, honours and the like was nothing less than the entire body of the citizens. And such a democracy could scarcely fail to degenerate into disorder and eventuate in despotism. In order to conduct a democracy in a constitutional manner, politicians must be limited in number to an assembly capable of being influenced or corrupted in an orderly or regular manner. A constitutional democracy, in short, must be a representative democracy.

The aristocratic government of Venice was, to be sure, a constitutional aristocracy. There were many reasons for the classical republican preference for aristocracy on the Venetian model: the wisdom and moderation of those invested with authority, its mixture of aristocracy with elements of monarchy and democracy, its use of the secret ballot and the rotation of offices.³⁷ Hume preferred the Venetian aristocracy for a simpler reason: it was that in Venice the nobles exercised their authority collectively; and this secured the government against the arbitrary or absolute power exercised in feudal aristocracies by lords over their vassals, exemplified in its worst form by the aristocratic government of Poland. It is clear perhaps that in his contempt for Polish aristocracy, Hume had in mind a more familiar aristocracy, the feudal nobility of Scotland, with its vast territorial holdings, its hereditary jurisdictions and its tradition of clan warfare. Hume once described the Scottish highlands as "the rudest perhaps of all the European nations; the most necessitous, the most turbulent, the most ferocious and the most unsettled."³⁸ And he welcomed the abolition of the hereditary jurisdictions of the Scottish lords, following the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion.³⁹ Hume was consistently opposed to the hereditary principle for aristocracies. And it is curious perhaps that he was virtually alone in the eighteenth century in favouring replacement of the hereditary peerage in Britain by a system of life peers, a proposal which he believed would have the merit of removing turbulent politicians from the Commons, immuring them safely in the relatively unthreatening upper house.⁴⁰

There remained the determination of an appropriate form for constitutional monarchy. Arguments in favour of elective monarchy had been advanced by classical republicans, notably by Sidney and by Walter Moyle.⁴¹ Hume conceded that the elective system offered certain advantages, such as some assurance of capacity for office. But the

37 Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans*, chap. 2, and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, chap. 8.

38 "Of the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems," in *Works*, vol. 4, 416.

39 Letter to Montesquieu, April 1749, in *Letters*, vol. 1, 134.

40 "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Works*, vol. 3, 491, and C. C. Weston, *English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords, 1556-1832* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 177, 174-75.

41 Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans*, 171, 153, and *passim*.

dangers attendant on conducting elections for so important an office, the prospect of the employment of "force, or money, or intrigue, to procure the votes of the electors," the possibilities for the reward of friends and the punishment of enemies, the danger of electing a monarch with obligations to foreign powers, all suggested to Hume that elected monarchy was less likely to secure a uniform style of political conduct than the hereditary system.⁴² Thus hereditary monarchy, aristocracy without vassals and representative democracy offered the best arrangements for a constitutional or regular manner of conduct in public affairs.

V

Now if the classical republican assessment of simple forms of government had obscured the possibilities of constitutional government in democracy, aristocracy and monarchy, their understanding of mixed government, the only kind of constitutional government they would admit, laboured under a more basic misunderstanding. This was the belief that mixed government offered the best conditions for the enjoyment of political virtue, and that such virtue was guaranteed in the mixed government of Great Britain by what Bolingbroke liked to call the independence of Parliament.⁴³

The belief that constitutional government might be based on the assumption that politicians are capable of virtue seemed to Hume the most fundamental kind of error. In contriving and maintaining the constitutional arrangements of a government one should assume instead that, in politics, all men are vicious or corrupt. Hume took over the maxim that in "fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end in all his actions than private interest"⁴⁴ from an empirical tradition of interest politics which may be traced to the empirical aspect of Machiavelli's work, his preoccupation with avarice and ambition in politics, the tradition explored by Felix Raab.⁴⁵ Of course, the meaning of interest in politics is notoriously difficult to fix and J. A. W. Gunn's observation that "no group of men more rapidly made the term its own than the preachers, and advice about one's true interest thundered from the pulpit for the remainder of the century"⁴⁶ is a valuable reminder that

42 "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Works*, vol. 3, 101.

43 "A Dissertation Upon Parties," in *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke*, vol. 2, Letters X-XIII.

44 "Of the Independence of Parliament," in *Works*, vol. 3, 117-18.

45 Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, 157-68 and 233ff.

46 J. A. W. Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest in England in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 38, and "Interest Will Not Lie: A Seventeenth Century Political Maxim," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29 (1968), 551-64.

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the politics of interest has many aspects, some of them having little in common with the secular world of *ambizione* described by Machiavelli. But Hume's view of interest in politics clearly derives from those anti-clerical or worldly thinkers who regarded the pursuit of interest as directly opposed to a life of virtue, who believed with La Rochefoucauld that "les vertus se perdent dans l'intérêt, comme les fleuves se perdent dans le mer."⁴⁷ The constitutionalist whose position most closely resembles Hume's in this respect was Mandeville, who thought "the best constitution" one "which provides against the worst contingencies, that is armed against knaves, treachery and deceit . . . and remains unshaken though most men should prove knaves."⁴⁸

Hume's contribution to this tradition was to have elucidated the pursuit of interest from the perspective which characterized all aspects of his understanding of human nature: the perspective of man in society. Interest for Hume denoted "the avidity . . . of acquiring goods for ourselves and our nearest friends,"⁴⁹ where goods were understood not merely in terms of material possessions, but in terms of any acquisitions, offices, titles, honours, etc. which might be considered an appropriate subject of pride and social esteem. The pursuit of interests of this kind posed a special problem for politicians. In the circumstances of ordinary or social life, human conduct was influenced by the approval and disapproval of others. Indeed, in company and polite society, personal identity could be discovered only in the mirror for character afforded by the moral judgments and habitual responses of others. But in politics this indispensable form of social control was lacking, for politicians can depend on the approval of other members of their party. Unless the interests of politicians are checked by the experimental arrangements of the constitution, they may be expected to pursue their individual and collective interests to the detriment of ordinary or social life.⁵⁰

In this light it may be pertinent to remark that Hume's often reiterated professions of moderation in his approach to political questions are in one respect at least misleading. Hume did not depend on moderate or philosophical temperaments in politics, any more than he thought it possible to depend on natural or moral sentiments in the administration of justice. He believed rather that good government could be achieved quite irrespective of the moral qualities and characters of the politicians who conduct the government.⁵¹ If the constitutional arrangements were judiciously ordered, then men in society could be assured that they would not be abused by their politicians. "A constitution is only so far

47 Duc de la Rochefoucauld, Maxime No. 171, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), 429.

48 Bernard de Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church and National Happiness* (3rd ed.; London, 1731), 332. The first edition was published in 1720.

49 *Treatise*, Book III, Part II, Sect. II, 491-92.

50 "Of the Independence of Parliament," in *Works*, vol. 3, 119.

51 "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Works*, vol. 3, 99, 107.

good as it provides a remedy against maladministration; and if the British, when in its greatest vigour, and repaired by two such remarkable events as the Revolution and the accession . . . does not provide any such remedy, we are rather beholden to any minister who undermines it, and affords us an opportunity of erecting a better one in its place."⁵² If everything depended on the constitution it was of the utmost importance to determine the constitutional arrangements which in fact prevailed in eighteenth-century Britain.

The mixed constitution of Great Britain was something of an anomaly in this respect. For the constitution provided no formal checks on the collective interest of members of the Commons. The royal power to refuse assent to bills had gone unexercised for so long (since Queen Anne's refusal to give royal assent to the Scotch Militia Bill of 1707)⁵³ that it must be assumed to be no power at all. The House of Lords was merely a "frail" legislative power, inconsequential in comparison with the Commons and the Crown. In the circumstances, the Commons might easily overpower the other institutions by withholding supply, or by attaching conditions to such grants which would eventually bring the government entirely under their control. The best explanation for their inaction was just the interest of venality of individual members. The power of the Crown to appoint members of the Commons to positions in the military and civil service, the power to confer titles and honours and in other ways appeal to the interests and the pride of members of Parliament was the best safeguard against the abuse of democratic power.⁵⁴

Now this explanation of the merits of the eighteenth-century constitution, so often cited with approval by contemporary historians holding conceptions of human nature in politics which differ little if at all from Hume's, was clearly opposed to the views of Bolingbroke and his associates. The crucial link in the British constitution was not, as Bolingbroke had insisted, the independence of Parliament and Crown: it was the very system of corruption and dependence which Bolingbroke despised. But while Hume differed fundamentally from Bolingbroke on the respective importance of interest and virtue in the framing of constitutional arrangements, his position cannot be identified with the position taken by Bolingbroke's great adversary Sir Robert Walpole. The position of Walpole and his friends was that the influence of the Crown provided no more than a counterweight or balance to the property and revenue of the Commons.⁵⁵ Hume believed that once the power avail-

⁵² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵³ Sir William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (London: Methuen, 1938), vol. 10, 412.

⁵⁴ "Of the Independence of Parliament," in *Works*, vol. 3, 120-21.

⁵⁵ *The London Journal*, No. 797, October 5, 1734; No. 744, September 29, 1733; No. 765, February 23, 1734; No. 768, March 16, 1734, No. 796, September 28, 1734; No. 797, October 4, 1734. See Lawrence Hanson, *Government and the Press*,

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able to the Crown through influence or corruption was properly understood it would be evident that the British constitution was moving steadily towards an absolute monarchy. This argument was so little in accordance with the predilections of the Walpole press that it was in fact published by the Bolingbroke press, appearing in the issue of *The Craftsman* for October 10, 1741.⁵⁶ Like Bolingbroke's theory of the independence of Parliament Hume's theory that the British government inclined more to an absolute monarchy than to a republic was based upon a revision of Harrington's theory of property and power.

Harrington had been correct in his insight that power follows property, Hume thought, but the connection was not a necessary or material connection, it was a contingent connection resting on the beliefs and opinions of men, and on the psychology of social obligation. The ability of the Crown to offer employment, positions and honours to legislators generated a sense of social obligation, from which political power could be generated. Hume no doubt underestimated the weaknesses of the obligations and the power thus recruited, the uncertainty inevitably attendant on such connections in politics. But it enabled him to explain the power enjoyed by men like Crassus in republican Rome and by the Medici in Renaissance Florence. And his argument that the power of the Crown would ineluctably lead the mixed government of Britain to absolute monarchy, "the easiest death, the true euthanasia of the British constitution"⁵⁷ was memorable enough to make it employable by the parliamentary opponents of the system of influence later in the century. Dunning cited it in support of his famous resolution that the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished.⁵⁸ He was reminded, however, by the author of a *Letter to Lord North* (1780) that Hume had "directly opposed and answered the position in Lord Bolingbroke's *Dissertation on Parties* that the dependence of Parliament in every degree is an infringement of British liberty."⁵⁹ His essays could be cited, in short, on both sides of the question in the debate on economical reform. His position was not readily identifiable with the

1695-1763 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 112, and Isaac Kramick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), chap. 5, where it is suggested that Hume's position "came straight from the justification of corruption found in Walpole's press" (124).

56 *The Country Journal: or the Craftsman*, No. 797, October 10, 1741, where the essay "Whether the British Government Inclines More to an Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic" appears as a letter to the nominal editor, Caleb D'Anvers. The essay was then reprinted in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 11 (1741), 536-38.

57 "Whether the British Government Inclines More to an Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic," in *Works*, vol. 3, 126.

58 See Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 316.

59 Betty Kemp, *King and Commons, 1660-1832* (London: Macmillan, 1959), Appendix F, 156-57, 89, 114.

issues of either the court or the country party; it was part of a larger perspective on public life, which offered a new understanding of constitutional government.

VI

For underlying Hume's differences with Bolingbroke's and Harrington's understandings of the British constitution was a more profound difference concerning the role of legislators or law-givers in the framing of a constitution. It had been a central tenet of Machiavelli that a government can never be properly constituted, or reconstituted, when its institutions have become corrupt, unless this act of constitution or reconstitution is undertaken by a single man. The necessity of a single legislator or founder or framer of the constitution was intimately related to Machiavelli's perception of the need for extraordinary ability or *virtù* in bringing a state into existence, or in reconstituting a state which had become corrupt. Like Romulus, a legislator must be prepared to act violently, being assured that in the founding of states and the framing of constitutions, no reasonable man will blame him "for taking any action, however extraordinary, which may be of service in the organising of a kingdom or the constituting of a republic."⁶⁰ As Harrington later put it, if the state has not become corrupt there is no need for a reconstitution,

for the ordinary means not failing, the commonwealth has no need of a legislator; but the ordinary means failing, there is no recourse to be had but to such as are extraordinary. And, whereas a book or a building has not been known to attain to its perfection, if it has not had a sole author or architect; a commonwealth, as to the fabric of it is of the like nature. And thus it may be made at once; in which there be great advantages.⁶¹

A constitution so conceived was an artifact, wrested violently from the flux of human affairs, if one followed Machiavelli, or formed from the materials of property distribution, if one followed Harrington. It was in either case the product of the genius of a single legislator, of his wisdom and his ability to employ any means that might be necessary to establish the constitutional foundations of the state. And, equally important, as Harrington observed, it was accomplished "altogether or at once," thus ensuring an "economy of violence" in the act of foundation, and ensuring that a framework of law would exist from the beginning of the state.

Hume's understanding of constitutional government marks a departure from this classical conception of the legislator who fabricates a constitution in an act of foundation. Hume continued to attach importance to legislators and founders of states.⁶² But no legislator, however

60 Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, vol. 1, 234.

61 Harrington, *Oceana*, 78. See also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 209-10.

62 "Of Parties in General," in *Works*, vol. 3, 185.

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great a genius, could be entrusted with the sole responsibility of constituting a government.

To balance a large state or society, whether monarchical or republican, on general laws, is a work of so great difficulty, that no human genius, however comprehensive, is able, by the mere dint of reason and reflection to effect it. The judgements of many must unite in this work: Experience must guide their labour: Time must bring it to perfection: And the feeling of inconveniences must correct the mistakes, which they inevitably fall into, in their first trials and experiments.⁶³

A constitution, as Hume conceived it, remained an artificial contrivance but it was no longer the product of exceptional inspiration or wisdom; it was the work of judgment or experimental reason. It was, as Mandeville had said, the product of a division of labour among legislators. Mandeville had remarked on the laws and ordinances of cities that

there are very few that are the work of one man, or of one generation; the greatest part of them are the product, the joint labour of several ages. . . . The wisdom I speak of is not the offspring of a fine understanding; or intense thinking, but of sound and deliberate judgement, acquired from a long experience in business, and a multiplicity of observations. By this sort of wisdom and length of time, it may be brought about that there shall be no greater difficulty in governing a large city, than (pardon the lowness of the simile) there is in weaving of stockings.⁶⁴

It was moreover an important element in the understanding of a constitution reflected in the writings of Mandeville, and refined in the work of Hume, that a constitution was not designed to end corruption, or provide for a life of virtue. Accordingly there was no call for extraordinary virtue and certainly none for violence, in the activity of fabricating a constitution. It was assumed, rather, that corruption was an ineradicable feature of political life, and was not to be removed by a return to first principles or by a new beginning. Instead it was the constant duty of legislators, Hume insisted, to amend and adapt the rules and conventions of public life in a manner that would provide increasingly effective restraints on the corrupt behaviour of politicians. And in this work of constitutional adjustment or amendment, politicians must be guided by experience, and experimental reason.

Hume's insistence on the experimental nature of constitutional amendment marked a break with the classical republican emphasis on the virtue of the framers or founders of constitutions. But Hume did not think that legislators should merely reflect and formalize the manners and customs of a people at a given stage in their progress or refinement. This was the position taken later by Adam Ferguson and John Millar, who regarded the importance accorded legislators in "the concurring

63 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 185.

64 Bernard de Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. by F. B. Kaye (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), vol. 2, 321-22.

testimony of historians" as "exaggerated and misrepresented."⁶⁵ The influence of a Lycurgus or of a Romulus was due neither to their virtue nor their judgment, but rather to their grasp of the social institutions already established by the genius and the manners of the people. But the debunking of the role of the legislator in the works of later Scottish thinkers was part of a very different approach to political subjects from anything engaged in by Hume. The common concern of Ferguson, Millar, Smith, Kames and Robertson on questions of law and forms of government, no less than on question of policy, the arts, science, the condition of women, etc. was to explain all variations and changes in these phenomena as effects brought about by changes in the mode of production.⁶⁶ Hume's understanding of the causal connection between forms of government and society approached these questions from just the opposite direction: he assigned priority to the influence of the political. He believed that the uniform effects of forms of government upon society was in fact a condition of the scientific study of politics.⁶⁷ And he attempted to trace the influence of monarchical and republican government on various aspects of social behaviour. This part of Hume's political science, which may be considered one of his most distinctive and important contributions to political understanding, was, no less than his analysis of simple forms of government and of the British constitution, a critical commentary on themes which appeared in the classical republican tradition.

65 John Millar, "The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks," reprinted in William C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 177-78, and Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), 122-24, and Forbes's introduction, xxiv.

66 Ronald L. Meek, "The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology," in Meek (ed.), *Economics, Ideology and Other Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1967), and *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). See also Andrew Skinner, "Economics and History—The Scottish Enlightenment," *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 12 (1965), 10-22.

67 *E.C.H.U.*, Sect. VIII, Part I, 90: "How could politics be a science if laws and forms of government had not a uniform influence upon society?" See also Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, chap. 7. For a different interpretation of the relation between government and economic society in Hume's thought, see Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume*, 161ff. I have attempted to explore Hume's differences with his Scottish contemporaries more fully in "Hume's Theory of Justice and Property," *Political Studies* 24 (1976), 103-19. It should be added, however, that current reappraisals of the political thought of Adam Ferguson (by David Kettler) and of Adam Smith (by Donald Winch) suggest that political considerations may have been of first importance for these thinkers, as well as for Hume. See the contributions of Kettler and Winch to "The Year 1776 in the History of Political Thought," in J. G. A. Pocock (ed.), *Proceedings of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought*, 1976.

VII

The most important influence exerted by republican government on life in society was its tendency to promote a system of law. In order for men to live in society at all, it was necessary, Hume believed, that they should be capable of arriving at an agreement of judgments which take the form of conventions or laws. This was most likely to have occurred in republics; not because a legislator like Romulus or Lycurgus could be expected to impose such laws on the people; but rather because experience of the advantage of regular restraints on the conduct of magistrates or elected representatives could not fail to lead to the conviction that it was advantageous to have regular restraints on the conduct of everyone.⁶⁸ Roman legality was traceable not to the edicts of the early Roman kings, but to the demand for simple, general laws applicable to all citizens of the republic which were provided by the Twelve Tables. In England the emergence of general law derived from the accidental circumstances of the recovery of Roman law in the twelfth century, its extensive use to secure the large property holdings of the clergy, and the subsequent adoption of general law by Henry II and other European monarchs.⁶⁹ For once the advantages of general law became apparent, monarchical governments may come to adopt them. This had occurred most conspicuously in France, and was the cause of the emergence in France of civility, refinement in manners and in conversation. He said:

The French are the only people, except the Greeks, who have been at once philosophers, poets, orators, historians, painters, architects, sculptors and musicians. With regard to the stage, they have excelled even the Greeks, who far excelled the English. And, in common life, they have, in a great measure, perfected that art, the most useful and agreeable of any, *L'Art de Vivre*, the art of society and conversation.⁷⁰

The achievement of civility in France could only be explained by the influence of the form of government. Although an individual might acquire the arts of civility and conversation by endeavouring to be agreeable and sympathetic in his relations with others, an entire society could be directed in this way only by the general influence that government could provide. In a civilized monarchy the subject could depend upon those superior to him in rank to conduct themselves according to standards of polite or civilized behaviour. And where position at court depended, not on ancestry or force of arms, but on the ability to please or make an impression on the monarch, the subject could not fail to be motivated by a similar desire to impress or please. And that motivation provided the stimulus for artistic endeavour: "Politeness of manners,

68 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 179.

69 *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* (London, 1792), vol. 3, 299ff.

70 "Of Civil Liberty," in *Works*, vol. 3, 159.

therefore, arises most naturally in monarchies and courts; and where that flourishes, none of the liberal arts will be altogether neglected or despised."⁷¹

Now Hume's conception of art was basically the art of the drawing-room or *salon*; and there was much that was excluded by his perspective. The art which Hume admired had seemed to have reached its point of perfection in the theatre of Corneille and Racine, in the epigrams of La Rochefoucauld, in the prose of Swift and the verse of Pope. Shakespeare, on the other hand, was regarded by Hume as something of a buffoon; only if one called to mind the barbarism of the court at that time, the uncivilized Tartar despotism of the Tudors, could one excuse the crudities that infected his work.⁷² It was not only rustic geniuses like Shakespeare which were not comprehended in Hume's conception of art. There was equally no place in his understanding of human nature for that exploration of private or personal experience that became the hallmark of romanticism. And public art, the *paideia* or culture of the ancient world, was explicitly excluded. The republican governments of ancient Greece and Rome were notorious for the vulgarity of their public speeches, the coarseness of their humour, and the vanity of even their best authors. Hume attributed these regressive characteristics to the form of government; participation in the public realm was not conducive to self-restraint or concealment of emotion, and equality among citizens left no room for deference and civility in social relations.⁷³ Hume was obliged to concede, however, that the eloquence of the ancient orators surpassed the eloquence of even the best modern speakers.⁷⁴ Pitt the Elder was one of the few politicians in whom Hume recognized this particular ability.⁷⁵ But Hume regarded Pitt as a madman on various grounds as well as a disaster for English politics, for reasons to which we must shortly turn.

Hume's preoccupation with polite and elegant behaviour led him to attach great importance to gallantry. He was persuaded that sexual affection was indispensable for the existence of society. But he did not draw from this premise the conclusion that sexual affection must spread in ever-widening circles to embrace all of mankind in, as Pope had put it, "one vast circle of benevolence." Man's instincts required refinement in order to permit life in society, and gallantry was the most apposite form that refinement of sexual affection could take. He described it as a studied deference and complaisance (a desire to please) for the inclinations and opinions of members of what he liked to call "the fair sex." In the ancient republics, men exercised dominion over their wives, and

71 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 187.

72 *The History of England*, vol. 6, 191-92.

73 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 188-90.

74 "Of Eloquence," in *Works*, vol. 3, 294.

75 Letter to the Earl of Hertford, February 1776, in *Letters*, vol. 2, 18-23.

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women were thought to form no part of the public world. But in the civilized monarchies of the modern world the society of women improved the manners of courts, and the same inclination to please had carried over into the arts, into essay-writing, poetry, and every branch of artistic endeavour.

Now Hume, it should be said, never married, and he seems always to have held women in general in a certain awe. There are poems among his manuscripts, which deserve to be left in decent obscurity, which reflect this attitude. In his letters he liked to say that almost any other topic would be easier to understand. And ultimately, he despaired of reducing the study of women to the experimental method. As he wrote to one of his fair correspondents, "Sir Isaac Newton himself who could measure the courses of the planets, and weigh the earth as in a pair of scales, even he had not algebra enough to reduce that amiable part of our species to a just equation: and they are the only heavenly bodies, whose orbits are as yet uncertain."⁷⁶

VIII

Perhaps the most important of Hume's insights concerning the effects of government upon society were his reflections on the effect of government and policy on commerce. In the *Essays, Moral and Political*, Hume took the view that commerce was more likely to flourish under republican governments; not because they offered more security for the subject, for civilized monarchies provided security for property and contracts: but because trade was always less honourable under monarchies and was less likely to secure the esteem of persons of rank and condition.⁷⁷ In the *Political Discourses*, however, he recognized that the policies of republican governments had often been directly opposed to commerce. The problem was the republican principle of virtue as frugality, recalled by Montesquieu, but basic to the entire tradition. The ideal of the virtuous citizen as the small agricultural freeholder had been central to Machiavelli's preference for the rural tribes of the Roman Republic; it was surely a factor in Harrington's proposal for an agrarian law modelled on the legislation of Tiberius Gracchus; and it formed the basis of Bolingbroke's conviction that political virtue and a spirit of independence were most likely to be found in the ranks of country gentlemen, uncorrupted by the urban world of commerce, manufacturing and finance.

Hume found no virtue in frugality or self-denial. A virtuous character was one who was both useful and agreeable to himself and to others. And one of the most useful and agreeable qualities of character was industry. Industrious characters were agreeable because they rarely fell

76 Letter to Mrs. Dysart of Eccles, April 1751, in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 158-59.

77 "Of Civil Liberty," in *Works*, vol. 3, 294.

into the lethargy and boredom which afflict men unengaged in work.⁷⁸ And industry was useful not merely because its products were necessary for the relief of human needs, but because the working habits acquired in industry could be turned to military or public service in times of war. This was the utility of luxury:

[M]anufacturers increase the power of the state only as they store up so much labour, and that of a kind to which the public may lay claim without depriving anyone of the necessities of life. The more labour, therefore, is employed beyond mere necessities, the more powerful is any state; since the persons engaged in that labour may easily be converted to the public service.⁷⁹

Moreover, Hume was not opposed to the use of mercenary forces, provided such forces could be hired from poorer neighbours. Indeed, the use of public money for subsidies to allies and for the employment of mercenary forces was the only advantage he perceived in hoarding money in the public treasury.⁸⁰ In every other respect the volume of money would find a level consistent with its commerce and industry. The latter was the real source of wealth and strength in any nation.

There is an exchange with Adam Ferguson which brings out Hume's position on the question of subsidies to allies and auxiliary forces very well. It occurred during a journey taken by David Hume, Adam Ferguson and John Home to the city of Bath in 1776. Home wrote:

Nothing occurred worthy the writing down except Mr. David's plan of managing his kingdom in case Ferguson and I had been princes of the adjacent states. He knew very well, he said (having often disputed the point with us) the great opinion we had of military virtue as essential to every state; that from these sentiments rooted in us, he was certain he would be attacked and interrupted in his projects of cultivating, improving and civilizing mankind by the arts of peace; that he comforted himself with reflecting, that from our want of economy and order in our affairs, we should be continually in want of money; whilst he would have his finances in excellent condition, his magazines well filled and naval stores in abundance; but, that his final stroke of policy, upon which he depended, was to give one of us a large subsidy to fall upon the other, which would infallibly secure to him peace and quiet, and after a long war, would probably terminate in his being master of all three kingdoms.⁸¹

IX

Now Ferguson and John Home were both earnest advocates of the war with America; Hume, as is well known, was not. Mixed or republican governments should never attempt to be "commonwealths for in-

78 "Of Refinement in the Arts" (entitled "Of Luxury" in early editions of the *Political Discourses*, 1752-1758), in *Works*, vol. 3, 301.

79 "Of Commerce," in *Works*, vol. 3, 294.

80 "Of Money," in *Works*, vol. 3, 310.

81 John Home, "Appendix to the Account of the Life of Mr. John Home," in *Works*, ed. by Henry Mackenzie (Edinburgh, 1822), vol. 1, 181-82.

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crease," Hume consistently maintained. Absolute monarchies invariably provided more uniform or regular administrations for conquered territories than republics.⁸² And they were not inhibited in the measures they might adopt if their colonies should attempt to liberate themselves. This was the dilemma which confronted Great Britain in America. Hume wrote to William Strahan in October 1775:

Arbitrary power can extend its oppressive arm to the antipodes, but a limited government can never be upheld at a distance even where no disgusts have intervened: much less where violent animosities have taken place. We must therefore annul all the charters; abolish every democratical power in every colony; repeal the Habeas Corpus Act with regard to these; invest every governor with full discretionary powers; confiscate the estates of the chief planters; and hang three fourths of the clergy.⁸³

In the circumstances, the best policy was to "lay aside all anger, shake hands, and part friends. Or if we retain our anger let it be only against ourselves for our past folly; and against that wicked madman Pitt, who has reduced us to our present condition."⁸⁴

Giuseppe Giarrizzo was correct, no doubt, when he remarked that Hume failed to recognize the mysterious energy which burned in Pitt, his capacity for work, his rude but effective political convictions.⁸⁵ But Hume's hostility for Pitt was directly related to Pitt's use of the one institution which would ultimately, Hume thought, prove disastrous for British government and society: the institution of public credit. The main cause of public credit was not the growth of corruption, as Bolingbroke and Tories like Hume's friend Lord Elibank maintained;⁸⁶ the growth of public credit was due entirely to Britain's involvement in foreign wars and colonial adventures. Indeed, he contended, as late as 1768, in a letter to Turgot, that there was insufficient patronage or corruption in the British government. "A Minister here can amass no fortune, being checked in every little abuse; he can give little employment to his own friends, favourites and flatterers, but must bestow all offices on those who by their votes and credit may support government."⁸⁷ The growth of public credit was caused entirely by Britain's ill-considered foreign policy: "[A]bout half our wars with France, and all our public debts are owing more to our own imprudent vehemence than the ambition of our neighbours."⁸⁸ It was Britain's attempt "to exert such a prodigious power as it has maintained during our late wars; where we have so much exceeded not only our own

82 "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Works*, vol. 3, 103.

83 Letter to William Strahan, October 1775, in *Letters*, vol. 2, 301.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *David Hume politico e storico*, 90.

86 *Ibid.*, 94ff.

87 Letter to Turgot, June 1768, in *Letters*, vol. 2, 180.

88 "Of the Balance of Power," in *Works*, vol. 3, 354.

natural strength but even that of the greatest empires. This extravagance is the abuse so much complained of, as the source of all the dangers to which we are at present exposed."⁸⁹ The erroneous model which Britain had followed was the model of ancient Greece and ancient Rome: "We seem to have been more possessed with the ancient Greek spirit of jealous emulation, than actuated by the prudent views of modern politics."⁹⁰

X

Hume's most extended critique of the politics of ancient Greece and ancient Rome appears in his discourse "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations." If the main source of strength in any state derived from the members of its working men, it was worth considering how the modern world might compare with the ancient in this regard; and the populousness of the ancient world, like other aspects of their societies, must depend, in large part, on their form of government and politics. The factions of the ancient world were violent and antagonistic to a degree that might bear comparison only with the religious factions of modern times. Even the hatred and violence of the parties of modern Ireland were rivalled by the factions of ancient Greece, while the civil wars of the Roman Republic exhibit "the most frightful picture of massacres, proscriptions and forfeitures that ever was presented to the world."⁹¹ The effect of these factional struggles on population growth could not possibly have been salutary. For ancient historians record executions and banishments attendant upon every new upheaval in government, with "a fourth, a third, perhaps near half the city . . . slaughtered or expelled, every revolution . . ."⁹² And besides the people actually eliminated in this way, others would be prevented from raising children by the disorder and emotional conflict generated by the fighting.

Hume was not entirely oblivious to the claims to greatness of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. The problem was in part to account for the sources of their greatness given the frame of reference of his political science. How could so turbulent and unpredictable a government as the Athenian democracy have provided conditions for the extraordinary achievements in the arts and sciences realized by its citizens? How could the Roman Republic have endured for four centuries when its constitution perversely provided for two popular assemblies, the *comitia centuriata* and the *comitia tributa*, without securing adequate institutional checks on the conduct of either assembly? His answer was, first, that the Athenians had been sensible of the instability

89 "Of Public Credit," in *Works*, vol. 3, 368.

90 "Of the Balance of Power," in *Works*, vol. 3, 354.

91 "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," in *Works*, vol. 3, 408.

92 *Ibid.*, 403.

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of their democracy, and had provided for a process of indictment (the *graphe paranomon*) which permitted the prosecution of citizens who had introduced measures subsequently judged to be unpopular. It was an irregular procedure to be sure, but it protected the citizens against their own "levity and inconstancy," and it discouraged those citizens who might be tempted to initiate rash and ill-considered policies.⁹³ The success of the Roman Republic was also explicable only through the recognition that they had perceived an indispensable instrument of constitutional government, namely corruption. It was because the *comitia centuriata* with its patrician dominance had chosen to control voting in the *comitia tributa* "by intrigue, by influence, by money and by the respect paid to their characters" and had refrained from an open constitutional conflict that the republican government of Rome had endured for so long.⁹⁴

Hume's perception of the sources of strength in the Athenian democracy and in the Roman Republic betray perhaps more strikingly than any other feature of his political thinking the peculiar limitations of the frame of reference of his political science. The indictment of illegality in Athens was vulnerable, it would seem, to weaknesses not dissimilar to those which affected the practice of impeachment in eighteenth-century England: it was employed too infrequently to be an effective restraint on political action, and it was often used merely as an instrument of personal revenge.⁹⁵ And the parallel between the clientage system of republican Rome and the system of corruption in eighteenth-century Britain, noted by many historians,⁹⁶ suggests that in both cases, the difficulty of generating adequate power through influence was one of the central weaknesses of both systems. Hume's tendency to rely on personal interests and ambitions, and judicial checks on political conduct derives, however, from his basic assumption about human nature in politics: his assumption that the uniformities or regularities which may be discovered in public life are analogous to the uniformities which prevail in the social realm.

XI

Implicit in Hume's political science and his critique of the classical republican tradition was the proposal that republican theory must adopt

93 "Of Some Remarkable Customs," in *Works*, vol. 3, 374-77.

94 *Ibid.*, 378.

95 See J. W. Jones, *Law and Legal Theory of the Greeks* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 110-11. Paul Vinogradoff, *Outlines of Historical Jurisprudence* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1922), 138, notes that the case of Aeschines vs. Ktesiphon (Hume's main example of the *graphe paranomon*) was an instance of "the worst side of the practice, its use as a political weapon for personal motives."

96 See H. H. Scullard, *Roman Politics, 220-150 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), and Sir Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

a new orientation or direction. Politicians should abandon the attempt to conduct politics as though it were an activity isolated from the behaviour of men in society. They should attempt instead to discover a form of constitutional government which would reflect more accurately the conditions of social life as they presented themselves in the societies of the eighteenth century. His most explicit formulation of a government which could be adapted to the conditions of modern commercial societies was his "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." His model of a perfect republic is remarkable for many reasons: for its critical observations on Harrington's *Oceana*; for its expression in institutional forms of the basic categories of Hume's understanding of politics; but, most of all, there can be no doubt, for its influence on the thought of Hamilton and Madison. The most direct beneficiaries of Hume's political science were the authors of *The Federalist Papers*.

Harrington's *Oceana* was, in Hume's opinion, "the only valuable model of a commonwealth that has yet been offered to the public."⁹⁷ Unlike Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*, Harrington's work was based upon experience. But there were, as we have seen, crucial differences between Harrington and Hume in their understandings of experience, and those differences are traceable in part to their respective methodological assumptions, that is, to their different ideas of nature. But the change in scientific perspectives which underlies their conceptions of experience involved more than a revision by Hume of Harrington's methodological assumptions. It was possible for Hume to present his model of a perfect commonwealth within the ambit of a different idea of nature, because Hume was writing about a different kind of society. The society for which *Oceana* was designed was to be sure a society of independent proprietors, but the most significant form of proprietorship in a Harringtonian society was ownership of land. The society which underlies Hume's model of republican government was quite explicitly a commercial society of manufacturers, merchants and financiers, and the labourers, porters and clerks who worked in their service. And the sources of military and political power in such a society no longer depended on the ability of the gentry to bear arms: it depended rather on the surplus of labourers made available for recruitment into military service in wartime, and on the wealth made available from commerce for subsidies to allies and for domestic political support. Whatever the deficiencies in his theory of power, it was not a manifestly implausible theory for a commercial society; it was a perspective at all events which called attention to the difficulty presented by Harrington's reliance on the capacity for public virtue.

In the absence of public virtue, the fundamental laws of *Oceana*: the agrarian law, the rotation of offices and the division of authority and

97 "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Works*, vol. 3, 481.

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power, would all be incapable of implementation. For the agrarian law could be easily subverted by citizens sufficiently self-interested to conceal their property under the names of others, a device made easier to employ when ownership meant property in money or stock in trade, rather than visible property in lands and houses.⁹⁸ The rotation of offices involved an unnecessary waste of political experience, particularly when, in commercial societies, competent politicians must always be in short supply. And finally the separation of initiative and debate could only operate on the presumption that the initiative was held by aristocratic gentlemen with a disinterested concern for the common good. If Harrington's senators were determined by self-interest, they had only to ignore or overlook problems which required legislation, in order to bypass or override the interests of the people.⁹⁹ Harrington's republicanism required, in short, a capacity for frugality in the character and conduct of ordinary citizens; an eagerness to assume the responsibilities of public office; and a certain wisdom or disinterested benevolence in his senators. Such qualities were not to be depended upon in commercial societies. As Hamilton later put in his characteristically trenchant style:

We may preach till we are tired of the theme, the necessity of disinterestedness in republics without making a single proselyte. . . . [I]t is as ridiculous to seek for models in the simple ages of Greece and Rome as it would be to go in quest of them among the Hottentots and the Laplanders.¹⁰⁰

Now Hamilton's concern was to discover a model of republican government which would be applicable not only for a commercial society, but also for a large territory; such a model was not to be found in the classical tradition. The classical theory of republican government, reiterated with great force in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu and Rousseau, was that republics were possible only in cities or cantons or territories of very limited scope; this was not applicable, as Hamilton observed, to America: "When Montesquieu recommends a small extent for republics, the standards he had in view were of dimensions far short

98 "Of Public Credit," in *Works*, vol. 3, 371. In response to a proposal (of Archibald Hutchinson) that the debt might be discharged all at once, if every citizen would contribute a sum proportionate to his wealth, Hume remarked: "He seems not to have considered that property in money and stock in trade might easily be concealed or disguised; and that visible property in lands and houses would really at last answer for the whole: An inequality and oppression which would never be submitted to."

99 "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Works*, vol. 3, 481-82. The experience which suggested this line of reasoning to Hume was the experience of the Lords of the Articles in the Scottish Parliament. See Henry Home's description of this institution in *Essays Upon Several Subjects Concerning British Antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1747), 49-50.

100 *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), vol. 3, 103, and Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 70.

of the limits of every one of these states. Neither Virginia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, Carolina, nor Georgia can be compared with the models from which he reasoned and to which the terms of his description apply."¹⁰¹ The alternatives which classical theory presented for America were therefore bleak: either America must adopt an absolute monarchy, or the various states must be further divided into even smaller units which might be brought within a loose confederation of "little, jealous, clashing, tumultuous commonwealths, the wretched nurseries of unceasing discord and the miserable objects of universal pity or contempt."¹⁰²

Hume's idea of a perfect republic suggested a means of avoiding the classical dilemma. Any state, however large, could be divided into one hundred counties, and each county divided into one hundred parishes. The citizens would gather annually in the parish hall and elect a county representative. The extent of the franchise was made increasingly restrictive by Hume as he reworked successive drafts of the discourses: his ultimate preference was for a franchise limited to freeholders of twenty pounds a year in the counties, and to householders worth five hundred pounds in the towns. These restrictions on the franchise were severe, but more controversially, perhaps, nothing more was expected from the citizens than the election of their representatives. "The lower sort of people and small proprietors are good enough judges of one not very distant from them in rank and habitation . . . But they are wholly unfit for county meetings, and for electing into the higher offices of the republic."¹⁰³ The election of higher officers, ten magistrates and one senator, would be the privilege of the elected county representatives.

The exclusion of citizens from direct participation in the determination of policy was one of the signal merits of republics, as contrasted with democracies, in the view of Madison. And his formulation of this theme in the tenth *Federalist* paper was merely an abridgment, as Douglass Adair has shown, of Hume's model of a perfect republic.¹⁰⁴ And the argument was further developed by Hamilton in his case for an electoral college for the election of a president. He said: "It was peculiarly desirable to afford as little opportunity as possible to tumult and disorder . . . And as the electors, chosen in each state, are to assemble and vote in the state to which they are chosen, this detached and divided situation would expose them much less to heats and ferments . . . than if they were all to be convened at one time, in one place."¹⁰⁵

101 In *The Federalist Papers*, ed. by Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), no. 9, 73.

102 Ibid.

103 "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Works*, vol. 3, 487.

104 Douglass Adair, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science: David Hume, James Madison and the Tenth *Federalist*," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 20 (1957), 343-60.

105 *The Federalist Papers*, no. 68, 412.

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The other great advantage of republican governments, in Madison's eyes, was their ability to accommodate a plurality of factions and interests which would make it difficult in turn for any majority to dominate the rest. It was an argument derived in part from Hume's theory of the parties of Great Britain: although parties in general were undesirable in Hume's view, and although parties based on differences of principle or affection had ceased to be relevant in Britain, it was impossible, Hume thought, to eliminate parties of interest. There must always remain a party of men whose interests are unsatisfied, if the constitution were to avoid becoming an absolute monarchy. But in his model of a perfect commonwealth he proposed that the benefits of parties could be retained by legitimating the frustrations of unsuccessful candidates for public office: they would form a court of competitors, consisting of all defeated candidates for the Senate. These competitors would be entitled to investigate the political conduct of officeholders, and would provide a continuing opposition in government. There are traces of this proposal in *The Federalist Papers* in Madison's rationale for a separation of powers in government. Madison did not perceive the separation of powers in the same light as Bolingbroke had perceived the independence of Parliament. It was not the guarantor of public virtue, but merely the best means of ensuring that interests would be set in opposition to other interests in government.

Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of governments. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature.¹⁰⁶

Hume's willingness to rely on judicial checks on the conduct of politicians was given the fullest possible expression in his model of a perfect commonwealth. Any twenty counties might vote a senator, a magistrate or a county representative out of office for a period of one year, and any thirty counties might remove a public official for three years; the senate or the magistrates might take similar action; and the court of competitors had no other role than the initiation of proceedings of this sort. Moreover, if the Senate acquitted the accused, the court of competitors would be entitled to convene a special tribunal elected by the magistrates and county representatives and try the politician again before this new assembly.¹⁰⁷ It may be said that politicians in Hume's perfect commonwealth would have little time for any other aspect of public business than these indictments and trials of their fellow politicians. The Federalists were less prepared to rely on impeachment proceedings. The offences for which politicians are tried, Hamilton

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., no. 51, 322.

¹⁰⁷ "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in *Works*, vol. 3, 483, 485.

said, are often "of a nature which may with peculiar propriety be denominated *political*, as they relate chiefly to injuries done immediately to the society itself. The prosecution of them, for this reason, will seldom fail to agitate the passions of the whole community, and to divide it into parties more or less friendly or inimical to the accused."¹⁰⁸ A better guarantee of constitutional behaviour was to be found in the judiciary itself, which must be invested with the authority "to declare all acts contrary to the manifest tenor of the constitution void."¹⁰⁹ This view of the matter, we may presume, would have been entirely acceptable to Hume, who said, in the last of his political essays, that we must look upon all the vast apparatus of our government as having ultimately no other object or purpose, but the distribution of justice, or, in other words, the support of the twelve judges. Kings and parliaments, fleets and armies, officers of the court and revenue, ambassadors, ministers and privy councillors are all subordinate in their end to this part of administration. Even the clergy . . . may justly be thought, so far as regards this world, to have no other useful object of their institution.¹¹⁰

Thus whatever other influences shaped the political thought and conduct of Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, it is evident that Hume's political science and particularly his "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" exercised a most important if not a decisive influence upon them. They were, perhaps, more than anyone, the "legislators and founders of states," whose work most faithfully reflects the maxims and the institutional forms of Hume's political science. It was entirely consistent with this intellectual background that *The Federalist Papers* should have concluded with Hume's admonition to permit experience to correct the initial errors of those who attempt "to balance a large state or society . . . on general laws . . . by the mere dint of reason and reflection . . ."¹¹¹ And in the circumstances it is no less appropriate that the greatest critic of the Federalists should have accurately discerned the source of the political ideas he so heartily opposed.

I fear nothing for our liberty [said Jefferson] from the assaults of force; but I have seen and felt much and fear more from English books, English prejudices, English manners, and the apes, the dupes and designs among our professional crafts. When I look around me for security against these seductions, I find it in the widespread of our agricultural citizens, in their unsophisticated minds, their independence and their power, if called on, to crush the Humists of our cities, and to maintain the principles which severed us from England.¹¹²

108 *The Federalist Papers*, no. 65, 396.

109 *Ibid.*, no. 78, 466.

110 "Of the Origin of Government," in *Works*, vol. 3, 113-14. This essay was added to the last edition of Hume's essays, published in 1777.

111 "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Works*, vol. 3, 185, quoted by Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 85, 526-27.

112 Letter from Thomas Jefferson to H. G. Spafford, March 17, 1814, in *Thomas Jefferson on Democracy*, selected by Saul K. Padover (New York: Mentor Books, 1946), 85.

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Jefferson's distrust of Hume may have been, like Rousseau's, somewhat obsessive. We are told that "Not only did Jefferson fret publicly over the menace Hume represented to innocent students at Charlottesville, but he continued to worry privately over Hume's pernicious influence."¹¹³ There can be no doubt, however, that the object of his concern was judiciously selected. And he was not alone in believing that Hume's political science presented a formidable challenge to classical republican thought. Catherine Macauley, John Brown and Adam Ferguson all challenged Hume's critique of classical republicanism, in different contexts and in different idioms. But on Hume's own grounds, on the grounds of experience and the experimental method, his argument was a difficult one to answer.

In order to meet the challenge, a different method of elucidating experience was required. Such a method was perhaps already available in the literature of eighteenth-century thought in the method of Montesquieu, a phenomenological method which assumed that it was not a uniform idea of nature and human nature which must be understood, but rather that everything has a distinctive nature of its own. Hume was prepared to concede that Montesquieu's work was "the best system of political knowledge that, perhaps, has ever yet been communicated to the world."¹¹⁴ But notwithstanding Montesquieu's superior insight into the distinctive sources of inspiration which prompt men to engage in politics, there is one crucial respect at least in which Hume's political science reflects more accurately the political realities of his own time, and remains more relevant perhaps for us today.

The conclusion which Hume's political science ultimately forces upon us is that as long as men live in the kind of society which Hume understood so well, they will understand and conduct their politics in something like the manner he described. If one wishes to reconstitute fundamentally the public realm, it is not sufficient to appeal to a distinctive capacity for political virtue and political action. Any reconstitution of the public realm must be accompanied by a fundamental change in the conditions of men in society, without which classical republican politics must remain, as it was in the eighteenth century, a nostalgic dream, without foundation in experience.

113 H. R. Trevor Coulborn, *The Lamp of Experience* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 179.

114 "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals," in *Works*, vol. 4, 190, n. 1.

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Hume and the Contexts of Politics

RICHARD H. DEES

HUME'S POLITICAL THOUGHT has been variously characterized as archetypically conservative, as contractarian, as utilitarian, and as an elaborate apology for the eighteenth-century ruling classes.¹ In examining Hume's politics, commentators have—with good reason—focused on Hume's account of justice in the *Treatise*, and they have seen his account of justified rebellion as a mere appendage.² But in doing so, they have ignored some crucial elements of Hume's thought: history and context.

The contextual elements of Hume's thought are hidden to those who fail to look at what Hume *does* and not just at what he *says* when he makes judgments in politics. Hume, unlike most philosophers, is sensitive to history and to particular political contexts. He was in fact better known as a historian than as a philosopher until the twentieth century, and his *History of England* is his grandest and, in some ways, his most impressive work.³ Hume fancies himself

¹ For Hume's alleged conservatism, see Sheldon Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism," *American Political Science Review* 48 (1954): 999–1016; for his alleged contractarianism, see David Gauthier, "David Hume, Contractarian," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 3–38; for his alleged utilitarianism, see with some qualification, Frederick Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and for his alleged elitism, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chapter 16, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), chapters 15–16.

² See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, second edition, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 477–501 and 534–67, respectively. Future references will be in the text, designated by T, followed by the page number.

³ Several recent works have put the *History* to good use. See, most notably, Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Donald Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume, Historians on Historians* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); and Whelan, *Order and Artifice*.