

## David Hume: Ambassador from the World of Learning to the World of Conversation

*Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary.* Edited and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by Eugene F. Miller. With an apparatus of variant readings from the 1889 edition by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose. Revised Edition. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987). [All references in the text shown as E are to the 1985 Liberty Classics edition.]\*

Although many today would say that A *Treatise of Human Nature* is Hume's greatest philosophical work, Hume himself repudiated it in the "Advertisement" to the 1777 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, requesting of the public that they henceforth regard the essays of this volume as alone containing his philosophical sentiments. How are we to understand Hume's repudiation of the *Treatise*? The "Advertisement" describes the *Treatise* as a "juvenile work," the contents of which have been cast "anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected." In "My Own Life," written shortly before his death, Hume remarks that it was the "manner," not the "matter," of the *Treatise* that caused it to fall "*dead-born from the press*" (MOL, 1-2). There is no reason to think that Hume repudiated the philosophy of the *Treatise*. It was the form in which his thought was cast that he rejected. The *Treatise* was written in such a way as to be vulnerable to misunderstanding, and was often used against Hume to show that he held the most bizarre and destructive views, a fate which has plagued the book to this day. Hume's main concern in the "Advertisement" is to direct his readers to a body of work that does not lend itself to the sort of misreading the *Treatise* did. That body of work was in two volumes, one of which included *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *An Enquiry*

\*Hume's works are abbreviated in the text as follows: EU, EM-David Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* [EU] *And Concerning the Principles of Morals* [EM]. 3rd ed. Ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). H-The *History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second, 1688*. 6 vols. Based on the edition of 1778 with the author's last corrections and improvements. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983). L-The *Letters of David Hume*. 2 vols. Ed. J.Y.T. Grieg. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). MOL-"My Own Life" in *The History of England*. NHL-New *Letters of David Hume*. Ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954). NHR-The *Natural History of Religion*. Ed. H.E. Root. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956). T-A *Treatise of Human Nature*. 2nd edition with text revised and variant readings by P.H. Nidditch. Ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

*Concerning the Principles of Morals, The Natural History of Religion, and a Dissertation on the Passions*, the other of which included the subject of this study, the *Essays, Moral, Political, & Literary*. These essays constitute half of what Hume put forth, in the last days of his life, as his mature philosophical work.

In Hume's lifetime, the *Treatise* was a failure, and he never publicly acknowledged it except posthumously in the "Advertisement" and in "My Own Life." The *Treatise* was published in 1739-40, and Hume began writing philosophical essays shortly thereafter. By late 1741, he published a volume entitled *Essays, Moral and Political* in Edinburgh, and a second volume under the same title in 1742. In 1752, Hume issued a new volume of essays under the title *Political Discourses*. Over the years this volume was combined in new editions with the original two volumes. In these editions, Hume made numerous corrections, added new essays, and dropped others. The last edition he prepared was published posthumously in 1777. It contained thirty-nine essays, nineteen of which were from the original set, which had, by 1777, gone through eleven editions. Throughout his career Hume was engaged in writing philosophical essays, the total collection of which runs to slightly under 600 pages, which is about the size of the *Treatise*.

Hume's essays were well received in Britain, Europe, and America. They were translated into French, German, and Italian. And it was in a 1748 edition of the *Essays* that Hume first attached his name to a published work. From 1754-62 Hume published his monumental *History of England* which went through eight editions in his lifetime and through at least 165 posthumous editions. It was the standard work on English history until Macaulay's history began to replace it in the mid-nineteenth century. Even so it was printed down to the end of the nineteenth century when the young Winston Churchill learned English history from an abridged edition.

During his lifetime, and for long after, Hume was known primarily as an essayist and historian. He is still classed in the British Library as Hume "the Historian." T.H. Green republished Hume's philosophical works in 1874-75, attaching a long introductory essay on the *Treatise*. This was the first serious study of the *Treatise* since Thomas Reid's remarks in the *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764). Like Reid, Green interpreted Hume as a brilliant but negative thinker who had carried the egocentric and nominalistic principles of modern philosophy to the bitter, skeptical dead-end. Hume had nothing positive of his own to say, but his arguments were powerful and had to be "answered." It was not until Kemp Smith's *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941) that the *Treatise* could be viewed as not merely a negative work but as having positive doctrines of its own. Studies in the last thirteen years have

shown the *Treatise* to contain riches unsuspected by earlier commentators, and the work of revision continues.

Almost in proportion as interest in Hume's *Treatise* increased, beginning in the late nineteenth century, interest in Hume as historian and essayist decreased. Until very recently the *History of England* had long been out of print and the *Essays* were not always available. The recent publication by Liberty Classics of the *History of England* (1983) and the *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (1985, 1987) make it easier to raise the question of the relation between Hume's thought as philosopher, essayist, and historian.

Hume is remarkable in the history of philosophy in that he is recognized as one of the greatest philosophers and one of the greatest historians. Philosophers have often made contributions to other disciplines, but they have usually been in the ahistorical inquiries of mathematics and natural science; one thinks, for instance, of Descartes, Leibniz, and Whitehead. But few have been philosophers and historians. And none have achieved the greatness of Hume in both. Nor is this an accident, for Hume's conception of philosophy itself is deeply historical. And one effect of his career as a writer was to help bring about a rapprochement between philosophy and history.<sup>1</sup> In this his work resembles such thinkers as Vico, Hegel, Collingwood, and Voegelin.

The *Essays* are an important link in this rapprochement, for they enable us to see how the highly abstract reflection of the *Treatise* and the concrete narration of the *History* are expressions of the same mind. I cannot explore this thesis systematically in the present essay, though something more will be said later on. In the meantime, our primary concern is with the teachings of the *Essays* themselves. And we have Hume's judgment that the philosophical principles of the *Treatise* and the *Essays* are the same and that the latter is a recasting, and, on the whole, a better expression of those principles.

One barrier to understanding the *Essays* is that the *Treatise* is now viewed as Hume's most important philosophical work and has been massively misunderstood by philosophical commentators. It is not that this misunderstanding is then read into the *Essays*; rather, because of it the *Essays* are seldom read at all because the philosophy expressed there is so at odds with what the *Treatise* is taken to be. This has led to the view that Hume was motivated mainly by desire for literary fame and that, having reached a skeptical impasse in the *Treatise*, he abandoned philosophy for the popular career of essayist and historian. This was Mill's view: "Hume possessed powers of a very high order; but regard for truth

1. I explore this rapprochement in full in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

formed no part of his character. He reasoned with surprising acuteness; but the object of his reasonings was, not to obtain truth, but to show that it is unattainable. His mind, too, was completely enslaved by a taste for literature . . . that literature . . . which without regard for truth or utility, seeks only to excite emotion."<sup>2</sup> John H. Randall wrote of Hume's philosophy that it is "extremely acute, and malicious throughout...."<sup>3</sup> H.A. Prichard wrote of the *Treatise*: "of course there is a great deal of cleverness in it, but the cleverness is only that of extreme ingenuity or perversity, and the ingenuity is only exceeded by the perversity."<sup>4</sup> This is the old reading of Hume as a nihilistic and subversive skeptic and, though it has been challenged in recent years, it is still strong. D. C. Stove, a little over a decade ago, wrote: "The overall impression made by Hume's philosophy on its readers has always been remarkably uniform; and it has been the kind which they have tried to express by calling it 'sceptical,' or 'negative,' or 'critical,' or 'destructive.' Hume has appeared to his readers as preeminently *a subverter* of natural or common sense beliefs...."<sup>5</sup>

Viewing the philosophy of the *Treatise* this way, it is difficult to know what to make of the *Essays* as an expression of it since they abound in and celebrate common sense beliefs on a wide range of subjects. It is important, therefore, to approach the *Essays* with a proper understanding of the *Treatise*. In the next section, I discuss the deepest doctrine of the *Treatise*: Hume's theory of philosophical reflection and the distinction between true and false forms of philosophical criticism. It is within the framework of this theory of what philosophy is that the *Essays*, as a whole, are best understood.

### **The Philosophy of the *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV**

The *Treatise* was projected in four books, three of which were completed: Book I, on the understanding; Book II, on the passions; and Book III, on morals and politics. Part of the contents of what was to have been a book on literary and aesthetic criticism appeared in the *Essays* as "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," "Of Eloquence," "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing," "Of Tragedy," "Of the Standard of Taste," and

2. John Stuart Mill, review of Brodie, *History of the British Empire*, in *Westminster Review* 2 (1824): 34.

3. John Randall, Jr., "David Hume: Radical Empiricist and Pragmatist," *Freedom and Experience: Essays Presented to Horace M. Kallen*, eds. Sidney Hook and Milton R. Konvitz (Ithaca, 1947), 293-94.

4. Harold A. Prichard, *Knowledge and Perception* (Oxford, 1950), 174.

5. D.C. Stove, "Hume, the Causal Principle, and Kemp Smith," *Hume Studies* 1, no. 1 (1975): 21.

"Of Essay Writing." Due to a near obsession of twentieth century philosophers with epistemological problems of science, attention has been directed mainly to Book I, on the understanding, yielding the nihilistic interpretation mentioned above as well as the equally famous reading of Hume as an empiricist in the positivist mold. Writing about Hume's influence on the Vienna Circle, A.J. Ayer observes: "those who stand closest to the Vienna Circle in their general outlook are Hume and Mach. It is remarkable how much of the doctrine that is now thought to be especially characteristic of logical positivism was already stated, or at least foreshadowed by Hume."<sup>6</sup>

This picture of Hume as primarily an epistemologist, whether nihilistic or positivistic, is fundamentally mistaken and renders Books II and III on the passions and morals opaque. Hume is clear that the *Treatise* is a study of the passions and how they determine the moral world, conceived broadly to include the entire domain of human action (T, 8). The *Treatise* is what was later to be called a philosophy of culture; the *Essays* are simply a development of that philosophy. The point of the epistemological reflections of Book I is to bring to light and to justify the deep conceptual framework which makes inquiry into human action possible. In this, Hume is not an empiricist of the positivist variety. Hume is a skeptic. Indeed, he is the last great philosopher to call himself a skeptic. Nor is he a skeptic in the Cartesian sense of one who seeks to subvert reason and common sense beliefs. Hume is a skeptic in the ancient Greek sense of *skeptikos*: insatiable and open inquiry in pursuit of the good life. Hume sought to reconstruct, in a modern context, the *wisdom* of the ancient skeptics. "Wisdom" is a concept that has virtually disappeared in contemporary philosophical discussion. The search for *wisdom* among the ancient skeptics had an atmosphere of *piety* about it utterly foreign to most contemporary philosophers.

The deepest doctrine of the *Treatise* is Hume's distinction between true and false philosophical reflection. What Hume calls true philosophy is the ultimate framework in which all doctrines of the *Treatise* are to receive meaning. One difficulty in understanding the *Treatise* is that this crucial distinction between true and false forms of philosophical thinking is not worked out until the fourth and last Part of Book I.<sup>7</sup> This accounts, in part, for the wildly different interpretations of the *Treatise*. Familiar Humean concepts such as impression, idea, force and vivacity, perception, belief, and self are given only partial technical meaning through most of the *Treatise*. It is not until Part IV of Book I, some 180 pages into the *Treatise*, that the framework is developed by reference to

6. *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (Glencoe, 1959), 4.

7. I discuss this in Chapter Two of *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*.

which these experiences receive their final Humean meaning. Moreover, Part IV of Book I is the most abstruse part of the *Treatise* and has proved difficult for everyone to understand. The result has been that it is easy to read the connotations of one's own philosophical framework into the very first pages of the *Treatise* so that by the time one reaches Hume's tortured discussion of the ultimate philosophical framework in which terms such as "impression" and "force and vivacity" are to receive their final meaning, the meanings of those terms will already be fixed in one's mind. Thus twentieth century empiricists will naturally read 'impressions' introduced on the first page of the *Treatise* as "sense data" or "private mental images." Once this is done the rest will seem to fall into place, and it will be easy to interpret Hume as a precursor of A. J. Ayer or Carnap, complete with the scientism and constricted view of human culture characteristic of the positivist school.

In this Part IV of Book I, Hume raises the deepest philosophical question of all; namely, what is philosophy? The question is not raised directly however; it emerges dialectically and is finally forced upon the reader in the process of examining such issues as our concept of the external world, the self, and the possibility of certain knowledge. Woven throughout these inquiries, Hume develops an ideal natural history of philosophical consciousness. It is one of the most searching examinations of philosophy ever written as it throws into question not only the conceptual possibility, but the *integrity* as well, of philosophical reflection.

Briefly, Hume's discovery was this. Philosophy is a special sort of inquiry governed by two principles which I shall call the ultimacy principle and the autonomy principle. (1) Philosophy is an attempt to understand the way things ultimately are. We are never content with an empirical understanding of things, but, as Hume says, "Push our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle. . . . This is our aim in all our studies and reflections" (T, 266). (2) Philosophical thinking is a radically free and self-justifying inquiry. This means that the philosopher must view himself as transcending, by critical reflection, the entire order of habit, custom, prejudice, and tradition. No custom or tradition, just because it is a custom or tradition, can be accepted by a philosopher as a reason for believing anything about the real. This transcendence from custom, as such, must be total. Anything less would reduce the philosopher to the role of handmaiden of theology, politics, or some other prejudice. As Hume writes: "Reason first appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims with an absolute sway and authority" (T, 186). The radical autonomy of philosophy demands that the philosopher, in thought at least if not in fact, cease being a participant in the prejudices of common life and become a spectator of

them. He must occupy, to use an image of Descartes's, an Archimedian position outside the domain of common life from which critical principles can be formulated unspotted by custom and prejudice.

Hume argues in Book I, Part IV that these principles are incoherent with other principles of our nature and that if philosophical reflection is to be coherent, it must reform itself. The reform issues in Hume's distinction between true and false philosophy. The distinction is presented in the form of a three-stage drama in which philosophical reflection emerges dialectically out of the prejudices of common life; imagines itself the sovereign spectator and arbiter of these prejudices; falls into self-alienation and incoherence; and through further reflection wins through to a true understanding of itself and to a reconciliation with the prejudices of common life from which it first emerged. Hume describes the basic outline of this dialectical process of thought as "three opinions, that rise above each other, according as the persons who form them acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are that of the vulgar, that of a false philosophy, and that of the true; where we shall find upon enquiry, that the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" (T, 222-23).

We have here a timeless natural history of philosophical consciousness which anyone seeking philosophical self-knowledge can work through in his own mind. The central discovery of true philosophy is that the autonomy principle must be reformed. Philosophical reflection which seeks to emancipate itself from the entire domain of prejudice is empty and if consistently carried out ends in total skepticism. As Hume says: "the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life" (T, 267-68). Philosophers, of course, do not end in total skepticism but only because they do not consistently apply the autonomy principle. At a moment of crisis, they unknowingly rely on some favorite prejudice which gives content to, and hides, what is otherwise an entirely vacuous way of thinking. The result is a polished and refined prejudice pompously passed off as the result of pure rational reflection, untainted by prejudice and custom.

In Hume's reform of philosophy, we must recognize a new principle which we may call the *autonomy of custom*. Whereas false philosophical reflection had presumed custom, as such, to be false unless certified by autonomous reason, Hume's maxim presumes custom, as such, to be true unless shown to be otherwise. A revised form of the autonomy principle remains. Philosophical reflection may criticize any prejudice of common life by comparison with other prejudices, and in the light of

abstract principles, ideals, and models, but these critical principles, ideals, and models must be thought of as having the imprint of an actual order of custom. There is no Archimedian point where critical principles can be formed, independent of the order of custom as a whole. The false philosopher is essentially impious, for he imagines himself to be the sovereign *spectator* and arbiter of whatever domain of custom he is reflecting upon. The true philosopher manifests a sense of piety, for he knows himself to be a critical *participant* in whatever domain of custom he is reflecting upon.

The new principle of the autonomy of custom reveals a mode of knowledge about which philosophers have had little to say, namely, knowledge, not through *propositional* reflection, but through primordial *participation*, what Hume regularly calls "common life." We must not confuse this with the "common sense" philosophy of Thomas Reid and G.E. Moore, namely, that there is a set of self-evident, common sense propositions which no one can doubt. Hume could not find any such propositions. Common life, for him, is a non-propositional order. Moreover, the recognition of the autonomy of common life is not something the vulgar are aware of, much less something they have a privileged possession of. It is a *philosophical* resolution to a philosophical problem and is available only to those who have passed through the three-stage natural history of philosophical consciousness mentioned above and have become "thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt" (EU, 162). That is to say, it is made possible by consistently pushing the autonomy principle all the way to where a total suspense of propositional judgment occurs. It is only when the entire domain of propositional thought about the world is reduced to silence that the authority of primordial participation can be heard. As Hume says in the "Introduction" to the *Treatise*, we must be in a position to see "that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside *our experience of their reality*; which is the reason of the mere vulgar, and what it required no study at first to have discovered . . . (T, xviii, italics added). "Experience" here is not what contemporary empiricists mean by the term; it is certainly not orders of "sense data" or private mental images. By "experience" Hume means primordial participation in "common life." And that is a notion more akin to the "life world" of Dilthey and the phenomenologists than to the "sense data" of contemporary empiricists.

Given Hume's views on the primacy of custom, habit, tradition, and remarks such as "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," it has been easy to think of Hume as endorsing some sort of anti-intellectual philistinism. It was this sort of reading that enabled Hamann



and Jacobi to use Hume as a prophet of romantic German irrationalism.<sup>8</sup> But such an interpretation is profoundly mistaken. Philosophical inquiry is the most self critical of all disciplines because it contains the autonomy principle which makes possible the most radical form of rational criticism. One is an intellectual or radical critic to the degree that this principle informs one's thought. Hume can claim that, in the natural history of philosophical consciousness of Book I, Part IV, he applied the autonomy principle more rigorously than most. What he discovered is that radical criticism, free from the constraints of custom, is not self-justifying, as the philosophical tradition believed, but self destructive. If critical thinking is to continue at all, one must recognize the autonomy of custom and revise the autonomy principle to operate *within* the domain of custom.

Now it must be kept in mind that the insight here is achieved dialectically and, like all dialectical thinking, has a narrative structure. Understanding is gained at the end of the process which was not possible at the beginning. The process ends in a revised form of the autonomy principle which is now constrained within the bounds of custom. But the recognition of the necessity of that revision is made possible by consistently applying the *unrevised* form of the autonomy principle. Although Hume is a critic of the philosophical tradition, his criticism is worked out within that tradition which requires the ultimacy principle and the radical form of the autonomy principle. So the *deepest* reflection of reason reveals the autonomy of custom and our existence as participants in custom rather than spectators of it.

Hume's reform in philosophy, however, does not require a revision of the ultimacy principle. Philosophical questions are still attempts to understand ultimate reality. Hume is not a positivist. Philosophical beliefs are beliefs about the real. But one's beliefs as well as one's doubts must be viewed with some diffidence, owing to the restrictions put on the autonomy principle which is now constrained to the domain of custom.

### **The *Essays* as Science and Philosophical Therapy**

All of Hume's philosophical work, and his historical work as well, may be viewed as an attempt to draw out the implications of the fundamental distinction between true and false philosophical reflection. This involves two tasks, a positive one and a negative one. The positive task is that of uncovering the passions and beliefs that constitute participation in common life and rendering these as coherent as possible: "Philosophical decisions are nothing but reflections of common life methodized and

8. See Isaiah Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism" in *David Hume, Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G.P. Morice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).

corrected" (EU, 162). This is what Hume calls true "philosophy" or "science." Hume uses the term 'science' in the traditional sense of any systematic body of knowledge. On this conception, for example, Greek grammar is a science. The negative task is the therapeutic one of purging common life of false philosophical reflections which distort and constrict it.

To better understand both of these tasks, we must examine more closely what Hume considers participation in common life to be. And we must turn first to Hume's conception of *convention*. A Humean convention is not the result of a promise. Conventions evolve spontaneously to satisfy human needs with little or no planning or reflection. Hume's paradigm of convention is language. The English language was not planned by anyone but spontaneously developed to satisfy the human need to communicate and to establish social orders such as marriage and property by symbolic performatory acts in language. Yet the English language is the work of men and is understood by men, not by propositional reflection, but by participation. What Hume calls the "moral world" (the entire domain of human action) is nothing but an order of spontaneously evolving conventions: language, justice, morals, science, religion, and so on.

If conventions evolve spontaneously, what role can reflection play in their evolution? Originally, the grammar of a language is known by participation and the speakers are unaware of the rules they follow. By reflection the rules may be uncovered. Speakers can know these are the correct rules by testing them against their own participation about which they cannot be mistaken. But the infallibility here is not Cartesian certainty, which is a propositional state belonging to an individual, self-determining mind. The certainty of participation is social and non-propositional.

Once the rules are discovered, however, new problems arise. The rules cannot cover all patterns of speech, and disputes will arise about the status of marginal participants. Is their language different or inferior? The language, in any case, continues to evolve and disagreements will occur within the original set of participants; some adhering faithfully to the old rules; others forming new rules; and both under pressure of changes in participation which have not yet taken on conscious propositional shape. Participation always outstrips propositional form.

The utility of critical reflection is that it enables us to gain propositional understanding of the conventions in which we participate; it enables us to refine them, to make changes which bring them into more coherent relations with other conventions; and it alerts us to the fact that novel and unsettling conventions have emerged in the past and will con-

tinue to emerge in the future. But critical reflection may distort as well as illuminate the order of evolving conventions. There are two kinds of distortion that can occur: philosophical and historical. Hume explores both sorts in the *Essays*, and we shall discuss them more fully below. Here only a brief characterization is necessary.

Hume holds that critical reflection is as natural to man as unreflective participation. The practice of critical reflection has itself evolved and become established in various conventions in law, theology, science, etc. But the most generalized form of reflection is philosophy governed by the ultimacy and autonomy principles, the master convention for critically reflecting on all conventions. Reflection of this sort can and typically does lose its way, becomes alienated from common life, and falls into what Hume called "false philosophy." By virtue of the autonomy principle, once a convention becomes an object of reflection, the philosophical spectator suspends the rules of that convention and reasons with himself, independent, not only of this convention but *any* convention, as to what the rules of that practice should be or even whether the practice should continue at all. To the degree that a thinker takes the autonomy principle seriously, he will be alienated from the convention. So that what started out merely as critical reflection on a convention, in the extreme (and consistent) case, turns out to totally subvert it. We now enter the dark inverted world of false philosophical consciousness where the philosopher constructs out of his own autonomous reason a theoretical world in total opposition to the order of participation out of which his thought emerged: what Hume called in the *Treatise*, "a world of its own . . . with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new" (T, 271). The alternative world of autonomous reason is alone held to be real, and the opposed world of custom is now seen as an illusion. Thus it was that Thales taught that everything is really just water; Berkeley: that the physical world is an order of private experiences in minds; Hobbes: that all acts of benevolence are acts of self love; Locke: that no government is legitimate unless founded on the consent of the people; and so on.

Now this inverted world of false philosophical consciousness throws the philosopher into a deep state of self-alienation, what Hume called in the *Treatise*, a "philosophical melancholy and delirium" (T, 269). False philosophical consciousness is held in tension between "two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embraced by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other" (T, 215). The alienated world of his own autonomous reason is alone considered real; yet the philosopher is and must be a participant in the very order of custom he is criticizing. Hume compared such a frame of mind, in the *Treatise*, to "the punishment of Sisyphus and Tantalus" (T, 223). This

dialectical tension generates the many bizarre forms of philosophical existence that populate the historical world.

We may distinguish three forms of false philosophical existence: the ascetic, the revolutionary, and the guilty. The alienated existence of the false philosopher, caught in two contrary worlds, gives rise to alternating feelings of arrogant self-sufficiency, implacable hostility to the world of custom, and to feelings of morbid self-disgust for being a participant in it (T, 263-74). The ascetic and revolutionary modes of philosophical existence are in implacable opposition to the pre-reflectively established conventions of common life and are determined to make no compromises with the world. They cannot bear, as Hume puts it in the *Treatise*, "to mix with such deformity" (T, 264). The ascetic philosopher retreats from common life into a world of his own. The revolutionary philosopher seeks a total destruction of the conventions of common life in order to build a totally new one. Existence in the mode of philosophic guilt occurs when the philosopher participates in the prejudices of common life, while at the same time disowning them. He declares as unreal the very existence in which he participates. As Berkeley was to say, he speaks with the vulgar but thinks with the learned. But what Hume discovered, working through the natural history of philosophical consciousness, is that the philosopher not only speaks with the vulgar, he *thinks* with them as well, whether he knows it or not. The true philosopher is distinguished by the fact that he knows that he does. These three forms of false philosophical existence will be discussed more fully in the last section of this article.

We turn now to the distortions of common life brought on by false historical reflections. False philosophical existence is an error due to alienation from the historicity of human conventions. Historical distortions are made *within* the historical order of conventions and so are closer to the truth than are the errors of false philosophical reflection. One theme running throughout the *Essays* is that the historicity of human conventions is not incompatible with a scientific understanding of human affairs. Hume does not deny that there are constants in human conventions, and he is at pains to show how these are compatible with the historical relativity of those conventions. But, within the historicity of conventions, errors in thought can occur which distort historical existence. Two such errors concern Hume in the *Essays*. One is the whig theory that the present constitution of Britain is ancient and has existed since Saxon times despite attempts through the centuries and at present to destroy it. Hume argues that the present constitution is of recent origin. The paranoia of whigs about the ancient constitution prevents them from understanding the very constitution in which they participate, its origin, the utilities it serves, and the means of its preservation and im-

provement. This whig error is part of a more general error of magnifying the greatness of ancient times over modern. In particular, Greek and Roman culture was considered virtuous, modern culture decadent. A major theme in the *Essays* is that modern social and political order is superior in nearly every respect.

In all, Hume published forty-nine essays, including those published posthumously. The essays are too numerous and the topics taken up too varied to discuss each one, even in a cursory way. The title of the *Essays* provides a convenient grouping into moral issues, political issues, and questions of literary taste. But, for Hume, these subjects have much broader scope and overlap in ways they do not today. In the sections that follow, the *Essays* will be discussed as exemplifications of the fundamental distinction between true and false philosophy forged in the *Treatise*. This involves two tasks: (1) a discussion of the concept of, and the methodological issues involved in, a true understanding of the evolving order of human conventions, (2) some of Hume's most important discoveries about this order, and (3) a discussion of those parts of the essays that reveal exercises in philosophical therapy; that is, attempts to free the order of participation from the distortions and constraints of false philosophical and historical reflection. Since these themes are woven throughout the whole of the *Essays*, it will be impossible to keep them distinct. However, I shall, more or less, attempt to do so and will take them in turn, devoting a section to each.

### **The Very Idea of a Science of Human Action**

In "Of Essay Writing," Hume explains the rationale of the *Essays* with a metaphor. As essayist, he is an ambassador from the world of learning to the world of company and conversation. "The Separation of the Learned from the conversable World seems to have been the great Defect of the last Age. . . . Learning "being shut up in Colleges and Cells. . . . Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study. . . ." He criticizes the Schoolmen for not basing their theories on experience. But his notion of "experience" is much richer than that of later empiricists: "what could be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in *common Life and Conversation*?" (E, 534-35, emphasis added). "Experience" here is not the "sense data" of empiricists such as Carnap and Ayer but critical *participation* with others in the affairs of common life.

Though seldom noticed, the same expansive notion of experience is presented in the *Treatise*: "We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them

as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (T, xix). However, there is a difference of emphasis rhetorically: in the *Treatise*, the philosopher is a spectator of men in company; in the *Essays*, the philosopher is presented as a participant in conversation. Hume is experimenting with the essay form as a useful medium for expressing his conception of philosophy as critical participation in common life. It is significant that, after the *Treatise*, Hume never again presented his thought in the form of a systematic theory. Except for a *Dissertation on the Passions*, Hume's remaining works are either essays (even the *Enquiry* on understanding was first published as a set of essays), narratives, dialogues, or histories. These are all forms of writing admirably suited to communicating the thoughts of participants in an activity.

Nor is this a matter of literary preference. Hume, I think, came to be suspicious of theoretical thinking in human affairs, though not in natural philosophy (what we should call natural science) and metaphysics. The reason is that the theoretician almost inevitably falls into the errors of false philosophy. He is first of all a spectator of whatever domain of common life he theorizes about; secondly, he must open up a distinction between reality and appearance, otherwise there is no need for a theory. The "reality" will typically be a hidden structure postulated to account for the appearances which the uninitiated take to be reality. Once these moves are made, it is almost impossible to avoid the inverted world of false philosophical consciousness: property is theft (Proudhon); all social roles are slavery (Rousseau); all history is the story of class struggle (Marx); etc.

The very nature of theoretical reflection on human affairs tends to false philosophy, and this tendency is reinforced by the vanity which naturally attends theoretical reflection. Hume writes in the *Treatise*: "Whatever has the air of a paradox, and is contrary to the first and most unprejudic'd notions of mankind is often greedily embrac'd by philosophers, as showing the superiority of their science, which cou'd discover opinions so remote from vulgar conception" (T, 26). And whatever causes "surprise and admiration" gives such pleasure to the mind that it "will never be persuaded that its pleasure is entirely without foundation." From "these dispositions in philosophers and their disciples . . . arises that mutual complaisance betwixt them; while the former furnish such plenty of strange and unaccountable opinions, and the latter so readily believe them" (T, 26).

In the essay "The Sceptic," Hume quarantines his own way of thinking from virtually the entire philosophical tradition which is prone to the theoretical inversions of false philosophy: "I have long entertained a suspicion, with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects,

and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute than assent to their conclusions. There is one mistake, to which they seem liable, almost without exception. . . . When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning" (E, 159). In the essay "Of the Study of History," Hume recommends history, with all its limitations, as a better way of understanding common life than is afforded by most philosophical systems: "philosophers are apt to bewilder themselves in the subtlety of their speculations; and we have seen some go as far as to deny the reality of all moral distinctions" (E, 567).

But history is not the only path to understanding common life. Hume thought that even the vulgar have infallible knowledge, through participation, of the conventions of common life. In the essay "Of the Original Contract," he argues that questions about the nature of political order are to be answered by established practice and opinion, and he observes "that, though an appeal to general opinion may justly, in the speculative sciences of metaphysics, natural philosophy, or astronomy, be deemed unfair and inconclusive, yet in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard . . ." (E, 486). The same doctrine is presented in the *Treatise*. In answering questions about the nature of justice, promise keeping, political allegiance, etc., Hume often opposes "the sentiments of the rabble to any philosophical reasoning. For it must be observ'd, that the opinions of men, in this case the nature of political allegiance carry with them a peculiar authority, and are, in a great measure, infallible" (T, 546). And in another place: "The general opinion of mankind has some authority in all cases; but in this of morals 'tis perfectly infallible" (T, 552). And Hume adds significantly: "Nor is it less infallible, because men cannot distinctly explain the principles, on which it is founded."

The kind of knowledge Hume is describing here is knowledge through participation which is entirely independent of theoretical thinking. The split in common life between appearance and reality which theoretical thinking opens up has no place: The French language really is what French speaking participants think it is. They may, of course, disagree among themselves about grammar, styles of speaking, and so forth, but there is no standard for resolving these disputes outside the community of participants. And the same goes for all conventions that constitute what Hume calls the moral world (the world of human action).

The hostility in the *Treatise* to theorizing, and to the false philosophical consciousness which comes in its wake, is increased in the *Essays*: "There is no virtue or moral duty, but what may, with facility, be refined

away, if we indulge a false philosophy, in sifting and scrutinizing it, by every captious rule of logic, in every light or position, in which it maybe placed" (E, 482). It is precisely this freedom from the constraints of participation that characterizes the autonomous reason of the philosophical spectator. This freedom enables the theoretician to postulate new and hidden structures to account for what is now seen as the mere surface of common life. But in moral philosophy, Hume insists, the *surface is* the reality: "New discoveries are not to be expected in these matters" (E, 487).

From the above it is clear that understanding in moral philosophy is quite different from understanding in natural philosophy. Let us examine more closely what the difference is. In the *Treatise*, Hume first presented his famous analysis of causality. Going back at least to Plato's *Phaedo*, it had been thought that causal connections are *intelligible* because the physical world is ordered by the mind of God and mind always acts for reasons. Hume argued that causal connections are not intelligible and that all we ever observe or can conceive of are constant conjunctions of like objects. Moreover, the very idea of causality, he argued, has a non-rational origin. Constant conjunctions of like experiences trigger a disposition in the mind to believe in the existence of invisible causal power. Many have thought that Hume denied the reality of such hidden powers. He did not. He maintained merely that our belief in them has a non-rational source. Indeed, it is the task of natural philosophy to test and systematize hypotheses about hidden powers, but we can know them only indirectly through their effects in experience. However, the relation between the theoretical power and its indirect manifestation in experience is never more than constant conjunction.

"Intelligibility" in natural philosophy, then, is simply a matter of ordering sets of empirically tested regularities into systems which have predictive power and retrodictive power. One system may be more intelligible than another in the sense that it has greater predictive and retrodictive power but both are, at bottom, ordered sets of constant conjunctions.

However, Hume holds that something like the sort of intelligibility sought for in vain by natural philosophers in the physical world is available to moral philosophers. The natural philosophers wants "*insight* into the internal structure or operating principle of objects" (T, 169, italics added). All he can find, however, are constant conjunctions. He "cannot penetrate into the *reason* of the conjunction" (T, 93, italics added). But this is precisely what we can do in moral philosophy. In the *Treatise* Hume observes: "We must certainly allow, that the cohesion of the parts of matter arises from natural and necessary principles, what-



ever difficulty we may find in explaining them: And for a like reason we must allow, that human society is founded on like principles; and our reason in the latter case, is better than even that in the former; because we not only observe, that men *always* seek society, but can also explain the principles, on which this universal propensity is founded" (T, 401-2, Hume's emphasis). Hume's point is that regularities in moral philosophy such as "men *always* form society" is intelligible in a way that regularities in natural philosophy such as "bodies attract as the inverse square of the distance" are not. In the former case, being participants in society ourselves, we can penetrate to the reason of the conjunction. In the latter case, we are confronted with a brute constant conjunction which can be explained only by covering it with a more general regularity of the same constant conjunction form. But no matter how general the regularity, insight into the conjunction can never be obtained.

This special insight into the rationale of human action is made possible by Hume's theory of sympathy which is a principle of communication whereby our ideas of the passions of others can be converted into the very passion our thought is about. So in understanding human action, we are guided not only by constant conjunction but by an internal grasp of the rationale of the conjunction. As Hume puts it in the *Treatise*: in understanding moral phenomena, we are "guided by common experience, as well as by a kind of *presentation*; which tells what will operate on others, by what we feel immediately in ourselves" (T, 332, Hume's emphasis).

The privileged insight moral philosophers have into human action is made special methodological use of by Hume in the essay "Of Some Remarkable Customs." There he warns "that all general maxims in politics ought to be established with great caution; and that irregular and extraordinary appearances are frequently discovered in the moral, as well as in the physical world" (E, 366). Natural philosophers cannot account for phenomena which contradict a regularity except by redescribing that regularity or by covering the phenomena with new ones. Moral philosophers, however, may account for irregular phenomena "after they happen, from springs and principles, of which every one has, within himself, or from observation, the strongest assurance and conviction: But it is often as impossible for human prudence, beforehand, to foresee and foretell them" (E, 366). Hume describes three political maxims which seem "irrefragable." He then shows how these have been contradicted by past political practices in the Athenian democracy, the Roman republic, and modern Britain. Though unsupported by regularities, each of these practices can be explained by uncovering the rationale or point of the action. In saying that such explanations are the privilege of moral philosophy and are not predictive, Hume contradicts the positivist

model of causal explanation in the human sciences with which his own view is often confused. Carl Hempel is the most famous proponent of this model, according to which (1) causal explanation, whether in the human or natural sciences, is a matter of covering the event to be explained with a lawlike regularity whether of deterministic or statistical form; (2) because to explain an event is to cover it with a law, the sort of *understanding* gained in the human sciences is no different from that in the natural sciences; (3) causal explanation and prediction are logically symmetrical: if one claims to have explained an event but could not have predicted the event beforehand, one has not really explained it. The reason is that causal arguments are inductive arguments and so must provide good grounds to believe that the event to be explained occurred rather than not.<sup>9</sup>

The essay "Of Some Remarkable Customs" shows that Hume rejected this positivist model of explanation in the human sciences. He, of course, did not deny that there are regularities in human action; indeed there are passages in the *Treatise* in which he does seem to accept the positivist model. For instance, he claims that: "there is but one kind of *necessity*, as there is but one kind of cause, and that the common distinction betwixt moral and physical necessity is without any foundation in nature. . . . 'Tis the constant conjunction of objects, along with the determination of the mind, which constitutes a physical [and a moral] necessity" (T, 171). Here Hume's point is that insofar as moral philosophers seek to establish matters of fact beyond their own observation or memory, they must use inductive (constant conjunction) arguments of the same sort natural philosophers do. But this is not incompatible with our having, in moral philosophy, an internal grasp of regularities which is not available to natural philosophers. Nor is it incompatible with our having that sort of insight into particular actions which contradict what were thought to be lawlike regularities, as Hume explains in "Of Some Remarkable Customs."

What was hinted at in the *Treatise* about moral philosophy being more intelligible than natural philosophy is made more explicit in this and other essays. For instance, in "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," Hume observes that "So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government . . . on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us" (E, 16). In comparing the tendencies of the Venetian and Polish republic, Hume observes that "The different operations and tendencies of these

9. Carl G. Hempel, "Explanation in Science and in History," in *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. William Dray (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 117.

two species of government might be made apparent even a priori" (E, 17). Again, there are "eternal political truths, which no time nor accidents can vary" (E, 19). In comparing maxims in politics with mathematical and a priori reasoning (and the comparison is only analogical), Hume is treating regularities in human affairs as manifesting a kind of intelligibility over and above their constant conjunction form.

He writes in the same way in the essay "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences." Consequences can be drawn from forms of government that have almost logical certainty. Thus Hume holds that it is impossible that the arts and sciences originate in a barbarous monarchy. He describes the contrary supposition as "scarcely to be consistent or rational" and as a "contradiction" (E, 117). Hume never talks this way with regard to general laws in natural philosophy; there the contrary supposition of any matter of fact is equally consistent with the fact itself. Likewise, in the essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," Hume establishes a regularity about the consequences of superstition and enthusiasm which, he says, "is founded in experience; and will also appear to be founded in reason, if we consider ..." (E, 76). Again, Hume is affirming a kind of intelligibility for regularities in human action in addition to their constant conjunction form.

In all of the above cases, the special sort of intelligibility to which Hume refers is the self-knowledge of participants who can recognize themselves in explications of the conventions in which they participate. Natural philosophy does not have this intelligibility because we do not know it as participants. Natural objects are and must be strange and alien existences, intelligible only as constant conjunctions. Hume's position is similar to Vico's principle that the true is the made: *verum et factum convertuntur*. To genuinely understand something as opposed to merely perceiving it is to have made it. Since God made nature, the principles of nature are intelligible only to him. Man, however, made history and the political world and so history and politics can be fully known to men. Hume's position is also similar to the later doctrine of *verstehen* as developed by such thinkers as Dilthey and Collingwood.

Hume's position in the *Essays* that moral philosophy is superior to natural is affirmed in the *Enquiry* on morals (1751) which Hume considered his best book. He contrasts the "studies of logic and metaphysics [including natural philosophy] with "the practical and more intelligible sciences of politics and morals" (EM, 214). Because of its superior intelligibility, moral philosophy is more valuable. In "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," Hume observes: "All these [religion and politics, metaphysics and morals] form the most considerable branches of science. Mathematics and natural philosophy, which only remain, are not half so valuable" (E, 126). This is an extension of the *Treatise* doc-

trine that mathematics and natural philosophy depend for their existence on moral philosophy "since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties" (T, xv). We may think of Hume as reconstructing Descartes's insight in "The Second Meditation" that mind is better known than body because any claim to knowledge about bodies must be certified by a reflection of the mind upon itself. The difference is that, for Hume, mind is social and historical; for Descartes, it is logically private and timeless. Much has been said about Hume wishing to be the Newton of the mind. This is usually taken to mean that Hume took physics and its methodology as the paradigm of knowledge. If the *Treatise* does not clearly show, the *Essays* do, that this is not Hume's view. It would be more correct to say that, like Vico, he took historical understanding, not physics, to be the paradigm of knowledge. And it is a paradigm that governs not only the social sciences but the natural sciences as well, insofar as natural science is an evolving convention like any other. That fact must be taken into account in any complete picture of what it means to know in natural science.

At the same time, Hume thought that the theoretical activity of philosophy requires greater intellectual capacity and genius than any other human endeavor, and he places natural philosophy at the top. In "Of the Middle Station of Life," he writes: "So rare is this character, that perhaps there has not as yet been above two in the world who can lay a just claim to it. At least, Galileo and Newton seem to me so far to excell all the rest, that I cannot admit any other into the same class with them." "Great Poets" may challenge the second place and "Great Orators and Historians" the third (E, 550-51). Perhaps Hume places natural philosophers in the first rank because their task is to penetrate the alien and unintelligible world of nature. One might imagine that this requires greater intellectual capacity than a study of the conventions of common life with their internal certainties, due to participation, which even the "rabble" can understand and where "New discoveries are not to be expected" (E, 487).

The conventions of common life are made possible by regularities of varying degrees of universality and stability. The reason for this variability is that human conventions are governed by *opinion*. It is not the physical fact that people are suffering that causes us to act but what that fact *means*. Hume taught this doctrine in the *Treatise*, and he affirms it in the *Essays*: "even interest itself, and all human affairs, are entirely governed by *opinion*" (E, 51). As opinions change, regularities and conventions change. Some regularities, such as "men *always* seek society" (T, 402) and those governing the conventions of language and justice are so deeply established as to be part of what we mean by human nature. Although all men participate in the conventions of society and language,

this participation takes the form of particular conventions such as English, Chinese, feudal, and modern society. The rationale of these conventions is the same: the satisfaction of certain human needs; but the particular forms they may take are infinitely variable. Given that there are men, we may safely predict that they will form society and speak a language, but we cannot predict what form that society or language will take. However, predictions of a more specific sort can be made within an historical epoch governed by a certain order of opinion. There is, for instance, a limit to the sort of social and political institutions that feudal and modern men are capable of. But even here there are exceptions. Alfred the Great was a wonder in a barbarian age (H, I, 63-80).

Moreover, as orders of opinion change and, consequently, as the conventions they inform change, expectations will be upset. Since the changes that bring on the collapse of a convention are often imperceptible, it will be difficult and usually impossible to know that one's convention is disintegrating and that new practices are required. It is for this reason that Hume warns, in several of the essays, against formulating general laws in the science of politics. In "Of Civil Liberty," he writes: "the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity. . . . It is not fully known, what degree of refinement, either in virtue or vice, human nature is susceptible of, nor what may be expected of mankind from any great revolution in their education, customs, or principles" (E, 88). In "Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," he observes that "It affords a violent prejudice against almost every science, that no prudent man, however sure of his principles, dares prophesy concerning any event, or foretel the remote consequences of things." This presumption against laws in moral philosophy is especially true of political science which "dares [not] ... foretel the situation of public affairs a few years hence" (E, 47).

In the three essays just mentioned and in "Of Some Remarkable Customs," Hume goes out of his way to explode what seem to be laws of politics. The lesson is that maxims in politics that have any interesting degree of specificity cannot be expected to hold beyond the historical order of opinion from which they are taken. And even here one must be extremely cautious. Hume mentions James Harrington's law "*that the balance of power depends on that of property*" (E, 47). From this Harrington concluded that, the balance of property having gone to Parliament which had established a republic, it would be "impossible ever to re-establish monarchy in England." Hume observed dryly that "his book was scarcely published when the king was restored; and we see, that monarchy has ever since subsisted upon the same footing as before" (E, 47-48).

But what, we may ask, is the utility of a science that can provide few generalizations that have predictive power? (1) Hume does not deny that there are regularities in politics having some degree of specificity on the basis of which predictions can be made. His point is that political philosophers are not sufficiently cautious in claiming they have discovered such regularities; and that the more specific they are the more vulnerable they are to changes of opinion, and the less specific the less useful they are as predictions. Hume claims to have discovered a number of useful regularities which he applies to political issues in the *Essays*, notably: "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," and the essays on political economy which make up I-IX of Part II of the 1777 edition (see appendix).

(2) As Hume makes clear in "Of Some Remarkable Customs," even when regularities, and hence predictions, are not available, it is possible for political philosophers to have an internal understanding of the rationale of political acts and institutions. And here the more specific the act the greater the possibility of understanding. These exercises in *verstehen*, whereby we can understand particular acts in their particularity, enable us to transcend the provinciality of our own time and culture. This ability of the moral philosopher to enter the individual minds of alien cultures remote from us in place and time, if practiced, affords insight into human motivation, broadens the scope of human participation, and helps strengthen a virtuous and humane disposition. These qualities are essential to the political scientist as Hume conceives him; for Hume is still rooted (as far as the human world is concerned) in the ancient and medieval conception of philosophy or science as the pursuit of *wisdom*. The political scientist is a participant, not the spectator, of an alien object, as is the natural scientist. His task is not to uncover hidden theoretical entities but to speak wisdom to fellow participants. As he puts it in "Of Parties in General," "Of all men, that distinguish themselves by memorable achievements, the first place of honour seems due to LEGISLATORS and founders of states, who transmit a system of laws and institutions to secure the peace, happiness, and liberty of future generations" (E, 54). The opportunity of founding a state is rare, but political scientists participate in that same activity of seeking political wisdom which Hume considers the most noble of all. In "Of Civil Liberty," he observes that "Those who employ their pens on political subjects, free from party-rage, and party-prejudices, cultivate a science, which, of all others, contributes most to public utility ..." (E, 87). And Hume himself acts as a founder in the essay "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth."

(3) The special understanding of particular actions and institutions

which moral philosophers have is not limited to re-thinking in one's own mind the rationale of *conscious* actions. Some actions have unintended consequences which constitute practices, the rationale of which participants may be unaware. We have already observed that conventions such as language and justice, though made by men, are not the result of conscious contrivance but evolved spontaneously over time to satisfy human needs. Such a convention is government, the rationale of which is to enforce the rules of justice. Hume explains the origin and rationale of this convention in "Of the First Principles of Government," "Of the Origin of Government," and "Of the Original Contract." Many of the other essays have to do with the evolution and comparative evaluation of particular conventions of government, such as the many republican and monarchical forms that have populated the historical world. Notable in this class are "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," "Of the Independency of Parliament," "Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," "Of Civil Liberty," "Of Refinement in the Arts," and "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences." In especially these essays, but in others as well, Hume is concerned to show how ancient and modern republics and monarchies function and what the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of government are. In doing this, he often uncovers utilities and disutilities of conventions about which participants might not be aware. These are very close to contemporary *functional* explanations in the social sciences.

The gap opened up between what one thinks one is doing and what one is really doing gives ample scope for Hume's ironic wit. Thus in the *History of England*, he can use the pious language of whigs, ironically, to speak of "the wisdom of the British constitution, or rather the concurrence of accidents" (H, V, 569). The utilities served by the British constitution (liberties made possible by the rule of law) were not the result of conscious planning and were achieved by means that are offensive to popular theories of the constitution. We shall explore more fully, in the last section, how theories can obscure and even threaten the utilities framed in the unintended consequences of actions.

In the meantime, it is important here to make the methodological point that the existence of unintended practices does not open the door to a theoretical science of human action on the model of theorizing in natural science. That model opens up a distinction between a hidden theoretical reality and the surface of experience, a pattern of thought which typically transforms the surface into the category of illusion. But for Hume moral philosophy, or the science of human action, is a science carried out on the surface, by the surface, and for the surface. This is the deep meaning of the image that the moral philosopher is an ambassador

from the world of learning to that of conversation and that he will attempt to establish a balance of trade between the two (E, 535). Unintended practices are still structures of the surface of experience. They are known through role-playing participation and the test of whether such a practice has been uncovered is whether participants can recognize themselves in the description of it.

The error of Marx and other social scientists is to have sought (on the model of natural science) a deterministic, theoretical explanation of the surface of social and political experience which is alien to participants. Thus a privileged class of theoretical experts, alone, understand the nature of social and political reality, roughly in the way that only the theoretical elite of natural science understand the physical world. The discussion in this section of some of the main methodological points in the *Essays* requires that we quarantine this view of the methodology of social science as far as possible from Hume's.

### Politics and Civilization

The title of the *Essays* suggests an equal division of political issues, moral issues, and issues having to do with good taste in the arts. In fact, the subject matter is overwhelmingly political. Of the thirty-nine essays published in the 1777 edition, twenty-six are on political themes. Eight are on the question of the good life, and five are on the meaning of taste. The sharp division we are inclined to make today between political philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics would have been foreign to Hume. Ethics as thought of in contemporary liberal society is an attempt to discover a supreme moral rule with which to judge the world. The rule, whether Kantian or utilitarian, transcends the world and opens up a yawning gap between "ought" and "is." By contrast, ethics for Hume is a study of those empirically known qualities in actions, characters, and institutions which produce in most men, under standard conditions, the moral sentiment. The relation between the qualities and the sentiment is a causal one and discoverable empirically. No gap is opened up between "is" and "ought" as in contemporary liberal theory. In fact, "ought" as understood in that theory ceases to be a moral category for Hume. to

It is an indication of the virtual dominance of liberal moral theory that Hume, in a famous passage of the *Treatise* (T, 469), is often credited with being the first modern thinker to frame the "is-ought" distinction, a dis-

10. Nicholas Capaldi, "Hume's Rejection of 'Ought' as a Moral Category," *Journal of Philosophy* (1966): 126-37. This thesis is further developed by Capaldi in a comprehensive interpretation of Hume's moral philosophy forthcoming.



tion often called "Hume's Law." In fact, Hume separated himself from what he identified as modern ethics which seeks to form a rule with which to judge the world. Instead, he identified with the ancients whom he thought founded ethics on sentiment and viewed critical moral thinking as a matter of correcting sentiment by reference to other sentiments *within* the world (EM, 197n). Far from being the first modern moral theorist, Hume may have been the first to have noted the wrongheaded direction modern moral theory was taking.

However this may be, moral philosophy for Hume is not a matter of applying a grim measuring rod to the world, but a matter of investigating the order of human sentiment in its particularity. Such a study is historical, requires discernment, and a keen judgment of taste. And it is here that ethics and criticism (the science of taste in the arts) overlap. Hume did not recognize a separate "aesthetic" domain (art for art's sake). For him, both ethics and criticism study qualities that are "useful and agreeable" to men, and both must "entertain and instruct." Both are a study of particulars and require good judgment: "No criticism can be instructive, which descends not to particulars, and is not full of examples and illustrations" (E, 194). The same is true of moral judgment. The essay "Of the Standard of Taste" treats morals and art as aspects of the same sort of critical activity. And "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" builds moral restraints into the standards of criticism: "We ought to be more on our guard against the excess of refinement than that of simplicity; and that because the former excess is both less *beautiful*, and more *dangerous* than the latter" (E, 194). Similar restrictions occur in "Of the Standard of Taste," e.g., (E, 246).

If the science of morals and the science of taste overlap by virtue of the concept of sentiment, both are the concern of politics; for a disorder in sentiment can bring about a disorder in the state. When Hume speaks of "the arts" and a science of "taste," he has in mind primarily literature broadly conceived. Language is a storehouse of the ideas and sentiments that shape our world. The state, therefore, has an interest in the cultivation of a literature of good taste. Again, it must be stressed that Hume does not mean the good taste of the dilettante who inhabits an "aesthetic" realm divorced from the moral and the political. Indeed, Hume thought that the critical cultivation of literature was a barometer by which one could measure the climate of a civilization. Throughout his life, but with increasing anxiety near the end, he lamented the failure of England (though not Scotland) to provide the conditions in which literature could flourish. Writing to Thomas Percy in 1773, he says: "I am only sorry to see, that the great Decline, if we ought not rather to say, the total Extinction of Literature in England, prognosticates a very short Duration of all our other Improvements, and threatens a new and a sud-

den Inroad of Ignorance, Superstition, and Barbarism " (NHL, 199). There is a study to be done on the political significance of Hume's critical observations on literature.

The *Essays*, then, are dominated by political themes. In what follows, I shall discuss the most important of these. The essays on morals and taste will be touched on insofar as they illuminate the political themes.

Most of the political essays may be viewed as an attack on the Whig ideology that had dominated British life throughout Hume's lifetime. In "My Own Life," written shortly before his death, Hume complained about the "senseless clamour" raised by the Whig party against his view of the British constitution in the *History* and *Essays*. And he continues with the bitter observation that he "had been taught by experience, that the Whig party were in possession of bestowing all places, both in the state and in literature" (MOL, xxxviii). From this powerful rostrum, the Whigs hammered into the national consciousness a certain view of the political world which Hume considered not only to be false but dangerous as well. I turn now to an examination of the main features of this whig ideology and Hume's criticism of it.

Throughout most of the seventeenth century, Britain was a poor, weak, and politically chaotic country. The entire British isles made up less than half the population of France. But by the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Britain began to appear on the scene as a rich, powerful, and populous nation. By the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, she had achieved a worldwide empire and was undisputed master of the seas. It was generally agreed that this success was due entirely to her constitution of liberty. Bernard Bailyn observes that "it would be difficult to exaggerate the keenness of eighteenth-century Britons' sense of their multifarious accomplishments and world eminence and their distinctiveness in the achievement of liberty. From the end of the war in 1713 until the crisis over America a half-century later the triumph of Britain in warfare, in commerce, and in statecraft was the constant theme not only of formal state pronouncements and of political essays, tracts, and orations but of *belles-lettres* as well. There was a general paean of praise to the steady increase in wealth, refinement, and security, and to the apparent perfection of government." <sup>11</sup>

The main points of Whig ideology were the following: (a) The British constitution with its balance of King, Lords, and Commons combines the three classical forms of government-monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy-into a harmonious whole. As such, it is the most perfect form of government and the most perfect system of liberty known to man. By comparison, the constitutions of France and Italy are "Turkish"

11. Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 17.

and the people under them "unthinking slaves." (b) The British system of liberty is not something new but an immemorial part of the *English* character and can be traced back to the Saxon forests. (c) The history of England, therefore, has been largely the story of defending the "ancient constitution" against usurpation by monarchs, papists, and antipatriotic factions of all kinds, but especially in modern times by the Stuart monarchy. (d) With the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a Protestant, liberty-loving constitution was *restored*: a modern reconstitution of the ancient constitution. (e) But there is a new threat to the constitution in the form of court corruption. The right of the King to appoint ministers and other officials has resulted in a corrupt system of court patronage which has swollen the civil lists, corrupted the members of Parliament, and threatens to undermine the constitutional balance between Crown and Parliament. Hume considered this Whig view of the British polity to be overly moralistic, backward looking, conspiratorial, chauvinistic, and barbarous. I shall take these themes in turn.

(1) The Whig mind orders the social and political world in moralistic and legalistic categories. Understanding the world is a matter of understanding who is oppressed and who are the oppressors. In politics, this is primarily a question about *rights*. Thus the English Civil War was a morality play about how Charles I sought to usurp the rights of Parliament; the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was about the right of Parliament to replace James II; and the American Revolution would be a question about the right of Parliament to tax the colonies. What rights Englishmen had were known through either the theory of the ancient constitution or the theory of the original contract.

Hume's challenge to all this was a causal, evolutionary conception of the norms of social and political order, a conception which forces thought beyond the categories of good and evil. In "Of the Original Contract," "Of the First Principles of Government," and "Of the Origin of Government," Hume denies that government has a rational origin in a contract, whether consciously or unconsciously made. Government, like language, is a convention which evolved spontaneously to satisfy human needs. The task of government is to enforce the rules of justice: the stability of possessions, their transference by consent, and the performance of promises. Though the functions of government are rational, Hume goes out of his way to stress that "it cannot be expected that men should beforehand be able to discover them, or foresee their operation. Government commences more casually and more imperfectly" (E, 39). It is only by long and painful experience, with little reflection, that men come to understand the rationale of government. The authority of government is not determined by rational calculations of self-interest, though Hume grants that such calculations may have played a part in the

primitive origins of government. Once established, however, authority is determined by custom and opinion: men are born into an order of obedience, a sentiment which over time is woven into the individual's character. But in all governments "there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest" (E, 40). The same custom and opinion which constrains the individual to obedience must also constrain the sovereign: "The sultan is master of the life and fortune of any individual; but will not be permitted to impose new taxes on his subjects: a French monarch can impose taxes at pleasure; but would find it dangerous to attempt the lives and fortunes of individuals" and so on with "other principles or prejudices [which] frequently resist all the authority of the civil magistrate; whose power, being founded on opinion, can never subvert other opinions, equally rooted with that of his title to dominion" (E, 40).

Though the function of government is the same everywhere, the forms that government, law, and administration take are as variable as the variety of human custom. One teaching of Hume's is that convention is *ingenious* and will not stop at even bizarre contrivances to achieve its ends. In the *Treatise*, he argued that superstition and justice have an important similarity. Contracts are constituted by what are called today "performatory utterances" and which Hume compared to the word magic of superstition. Language used in ritual acts has the power to transform natural objects and relations into property, marriages, political authority, and the entire hierarchy of status and rank among men which Hume calls the moral world (T, 524). A major difference, however, between justice and superstition is that justice is governed by social utility which is shaped by the infinite variety of custom, circumstance, and necessity. It is, therefore, more flexible, less systematic, and less consistent than conventions shaped by superstition which are not guided by social utility (T, 524-25).

This theme of the ingenuity of custom appears in "Of Some Remarkable Customs" and in "Of the Independency of Parliament" with the intention of raising the consciousness of the Whig establishment from a rationalistic conception of political norms to an historical and evolutionary one. According to Whig ideology, the British constitution is the perfection of government, a balance of the best in the three classical forms of government: monarchy (King), aristocracy (Lords), and democracy (Commons). These corresponded roughly to the three functions of government: executive, judicial, and legislative. Since these estates and functions, in fact, overlapped, Whigs were forced to view their own political world as "out of balance." This gave rise to a conspiratorial outlook in British politics which, Hume thought, threatened to undermine

the very constitution everyone wished to preserve. Both King and Opposition were Whigs in that they both accepted the theory of the balanced constitution. The Crown viewed the Opposition as threatening to undermine its role as independent executive; and the Opposition viewed Crown patronage as a means to corrupt Parliament and destroy its independence. In "Of the Independency of Parliament," Hume granted that patronage could be abused, but observed that the "balance" of the constitution could not be preserved without it. The Crown had been so reduced in formal powers and revenue that the House of Commons was virtually supreme. Hume argued that court patronage was the only means left to insure some measure of independence to the Crown and so the only way of securing the "balance" of the constitution, including an independent executive and judiciary, so important to the Whig notion of the rule of law (E, 43-44). Whig moralists may call the influence of the Crown "by the invidious appellations of corruption and dependence; but some degree and some kind of it are inseparable from the very nature of the constitution" (E, 45). The constitution is more a "paradox" (E, 44) than a rational system.

In "Of Some Remarkable Customs," he discusses another paradox: the arbitrary pressing of seamen in violation of the rights of "English subjects." Hume explores the paradoxical way this violation of the rule of law serves the interests of liberty and for that reason is tolerated: "Authority, in times of full internal peace and concord, is armed against law. ... Liberty, in a country of the highest liberty, is left entirely to its own defense, without any countenance or protection: The wild state of nature is renewed in one of the most civilized societies of mankind . . ." (E, 375-76).

The lesson to be drawn from both these examples is that an apparently rationally ordered structure such as the British constitution is, in fact, a fragile instrument holding together the most jarring and discordant elements. The error of Whig ideology and of Hume's "false philosophers" generally is to treat the rules, abstracted and stylized from political practice, as a reality in their own right. Instead, the rules should be seen as pale reflections of a practice, the unity of which is an uneasy tension of contrary elements. The rules are not properly understood, nor useful, unless they are seen as reflecting this tension.

(2) The Whig mind is backward looking. Another feature of Humean conventions, other than ingenuity, is that they are *dynamic* and *open ended*. Since conventions evolve spontaneously with little or no reflection, basic changes can occur in a convention of which participants are unaware. Looking back, one might be able to see that an entirely new practice had evolved out of an old one. But no one living through the

change could have known that a new practice was emerging. Since that is the case, prudence requires that one have an open mind to change but also that one hold to the established practice, grafting whatever changes are necessary onto it. Hume's "true philosophy" teaches that man is a radically convention-laden creature. Armed with this insight, he was able to appreciate the historicity of the British constitution, an understanding closed to Whig ideology. Hume agreed with the Whigs that the British constitution was the most perfect system of liberty known to man, and he agreed about its beneficial effects. In "Of the Protestant Succession," he observed that "during these last sixty years . . . Public liberty, with internal peace and order, has flourished.... Trade and manufactures, and agriculture, have increased: The arts, and sciences, and philosophy, have been cultivated. . . . And the glory of the nation has spread itself all over Europe. . . . So long and so glorious a period no nation almost can boast of: Nor is there another instance in the whole history of mankind, that so many millions of people have, during such a space of time, been held together, in a manner so free, no rational, and so suitable to the dignity of human nature" (E, 508).

This is Whig panegyric at its best. But Hume differed radically on how the constitution and its benefits came about. For Hume, the constitution is a fairly recent occurrence—washed up by the interplay of universal propensities of human nature and contingent historical forces. If understood, protected, and cultivated, it made possible an unprecedented development of liberty, commerce, manufacturing, and consequently a surplus of wealth which could be turned into culture. These values were lost on Whigs who had not achieved the perspective of viewing the constitution as an historical process having social utility. Instead, the constitution was viewed as the sacred reenactment of an immemorial constitution. And so the task of politics is the negative one of protecting a sacred object from decay and desecration rather than the positive one of cultivating a social instrument for activity in the present. The negative task meant that one must always be on the lookout for unpatriotic factions who intended to subvert the constitution, yielding the unreal, conspiratorial world of Whig history and politics.

The antidote to this is Hume's doctrine of man as a convention-laden creature, a teaching which carries man beyond the level of intentional good or evil: since the deep conventions of human life arise spontaneously, they are not the result of anyone's intention. Hume applies this teaching in "Of Passive Obedience," "Of the Original Contract," "Of the Coalition of Parties," and "Of the Protestant Succession" to explode the Whig idol of the wickedness of the Stuart kings. On this view, the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 are the story of how patriotic heroes had resisted attempts of the Stuart kings to overthrow

the ancient constitution and reduce the English to slavery. Hume argues that the present constitution of liberty is recent, not ancient. It began to emerge at the time of Charles I from causes that neither the King nor the Puritans understood. Looking back we can see that the Puritan revolutionaries played a role in jarring events into the shape of the eighteenth century constitution of liberty. But they did not intend such a constitution. Indeed, the very idea of civil liberty in the eighteenth century sense was not available. The Puritans were motivated instead by religious fanaticism which severely restricted their notion of liberty. But experience has shown that "the spirit of civil liberty, though at first connected with religious fanaticism, could purge itself from that pollution" (E, 501). We may honor the Puritan revolutionaries for the *unintended* consequences of their actions but not for their intentions; whereas, "according to the established maxims of lawyers and politicians, the views of the royalists ought, beforehand, to have appeared more solid, more safe, and more legal" (E, 500). It was Hume, not Butterfield, who first exposed "the whig interpretation of history." The criticism presented in the essays mentioned above is more fully developed in the volumes of the *History* dealing with the Tudors and Stuarts.

A specter haunting most of the political essays is political instability. It must be kept in mind, that by the beginning of the eighteenth century Britain had suffered nearly a century of civil war and political chaos. Tension continued throughout most of the century. Major Jacobite rebellions occurred in 1715 and 1745, and the American rebellion began in 1765, ending in a civil war which could have spread to Britain itself. To Hume, much of this was due to a disorder in opinion brought on by a false reading of the past. The failure of Whigs and Jacobites to understand the past meant failure to understand the nature and value of the present constitution. The tragic irony was that both factions were participants in a constitution of liberty which both affirmed but which was being torn apart by a disorder in opinion; in this case a false fixation on the past. It was a case of men tearing at their own entrails. Hume wrote "Of the Original Contract," "Of Passive Obedience," and "Of the Protestant Succession" either during or shortly after the Jacobite rebellion which began in the summer of 1745 and ended in the spring of 1746. His purpose was to remove the distortions of the past which were obscuring perception of the value, fragility, and possibilities of the present constitution. He had intended to publish all three in 1748, but "Of the Protestant Succession" was suppressed out of fear that its sympathetic reconstruction of Jacobite arguments, appearing so soon after the rebellion, would offend the Whig establishment.

This backward-looking Whig outlook often went hand in hand with

exaggerated praise of the virtues of ancient republics, particularly those of Rome and Sparta. Whigs admired the independence, frugality, and integrity of the ancient republican citizen who always placed the public good above his own. Puritan heroes of the Civil War or Whig heroes of 1688 were often seen as latter day reenactments of ancient republican virtue; and when compared to the decadence of the present, in Catharine Macaulay's words, "appear more than human." Ancient republican order was overwhelmed by monarchy which, in modern times, had increased its hold; so that Britain was the last bastion of freedom left over from the ancient world. A major theme of the political essays, either directly or indirectly, is that in nearly every respect the modern world is superior to the ancient. Of special mention are "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" in which Hume argues against the popular view that the modern world is decadent and less populous than the ancient world, and "Of Refinement in the Arts" in which he argues that the modern pursuit of commerce, manufacturing and the wealth they generate, far from corrupting the moderns, has produced a moral character that is superior to the ancients.

(3) Whig ideology is chauvinistic. Whig ideology viewed civil liberty (the rule of law) as the unique possession of the English national character: "the rights of an Englishman." The polite cultures of France and Italy were regularly described as "Turkish" regimes of "slavery." A conspiratorial style of domestic politics went hand in hand with a chauvinistic attitude to Europe. Thus the great Whig writer Catharine Macaulay complains that British education does not provide the young with an understanding of the English inheritance of liberty. They learn a little Greek and Latin literature and finish off with "what is called the tour of Europe, that is, a residence for two or three years in the countries of France and Italy. This is the finishing stroke that renders them useless to all the good purposes of preserving the birth-right of an Englishman [the ancient constitution]."<sup>13</sup> Being uneducated in the principles of free government, they "are caught with the gaudy tinsel of a superb court, the frolic levity of unreflecting slaves, and thus deceived by appearances, are rivited in a taste for servitude."<sup>14</sup> Hume, a Scotsman, and heir to centuries-old connections with France, had sympathy with this English chauvinism. Viewing the British constitution not as the sacred reenactment of an ancient constitution but as a fairly recent historical configuration, he argued that civil liberty is not a unique possession of the English, but part of a larger civilizing process of economic and moral

12. Catharine Macaulay, *The History of England* (London, 1763), ix.

13. *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

14. *Ibid.*



changes at work in Europe. These liberalizing forces have established the ideal and much of the practice of civil liberty in even absolute monarchies. In "Of Civil Liberty" he observes: "It may now be affirmed of civilized monarchies, what was formerly said in praise of republics alone, that they are *a government of Laws, not of Men*" (E, 94). And: "Private property seems to me almost as secure in a civilized European monarchy, as in a republic" (E, 93).

Hume agreed with the Whigs that Britain was the most liberal regime in Europe but he saw this not as a unique feature of English character but as the tip of the iceberg of a civilizing process underway in Europe. This process presents a rich variety of forms of government, morals, art, and commerce for investigation. The British should see themselves as participants in this wider European practice rather than as the last bastion of freedom in the world. The civilizing process is touched on in one way or another in most of the political essays but especially in "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," "Of Civil Liberty," "Of National Characters," "The Politics May be Reduced to a Science," and "Whether the British Government Inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic." The essays on political economy I-IX in Part II (see Appendix) are also important. And the *History of England* is, in large part, the story of the development of civilization in Britain.

Civilization, for Hume, is not merely a matter of acting according to certain principles (such as the rule of law); it is rather a form of self-knowledge. Man is a convention-laden being and may participate in conventions without having reflective knowledge of what he is doing. To the degree that men become aware of the evolving conventions that make up the moral world and gain some measure of control over them, they are to that degree civilized. The differences, therefore, between the barbarous man and the civilized man is *a cognitive* one. The barbarous man is lost in the conventions of common life; the civilized man has some critical understanding of them.

The mark of a civilized society is the cultivation of the critically reflective arts and sciences. In "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," Hume argues that the arts and sciences first arose in barbarous republics. The reason is that a republic, however primitive, "necessarily, by an infallible operation, gives rise to law, even before mankind have made any considerable advances in the other sciences. From law arises security: from security curiosity: and from curiosity knowledge. The latter steps of this progress may be more accidental; but the former are altogether necessary. A republic without laws can never have any duration" (E, 118). The rule of law is the source of "all security and happiness" that civilization can afford, and though the "slow product" of backward looking trial and error, "it is not preserved with the same diffi-

culty with which it is produced; but when it has once taken root, is a hardy plant, which will scarcely ever perish through the ill culture of men, or the rigour of the seasons" (E, 124). Through emulation, the rule of law is communicated from republics to monarchies, bringing the latter into the process of civilization. Once civilized by the rule of law, monarchies may even surpass republics in the perfection of art, science, and government; but this is only because of the "republican" elements contained within the larger order of opinion of which the monarchy is a part. Civilized monarchy, therefore, "owes all its perfection to the republican" (E, 125).

If barbarous republics are the original and "proper *nursery* for the arts and sciences, "an order of neighboring civilized states (republican or monarchical) "connected together by commerce and policy" are the *laboratory* (E, 119). Competition for the glory of scientific and artistic achievement enabled the free Greek city states "to make such considerable shoots as are even at this time the objects of our admiration" (E, 121). Christendom put a check to national competition, but this yoke is now being thrown off, so that the civilized monarchies and republics of Europe are "at present a copy, at large, of what Greece was formerly a pattern in miniature" (E, 121). It was British criticism that "checked the progress of the Cartesian philosophy, to which the French showed such a strong propensity." Likewise, "The severest scrutiny which Newton's theory has undergone proceeded not from his own countrymen, but from foreigners" (Ibid.).

An essential instrument in the laboratory of the civilizing process is commerce. Hume observes in "of Civil Liberty" that critical reflection upon commerce is a modern practice and is another point of superiority of modern culture over ancient: "Trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century; and there scarcely is any ancient writer on politics, who has made mention of it" (E, 88). In "Of Commerce," "Of Money," "Of Interest," "Of the Balance of Trade," "Of the Jealousy of Trade," "Of Taxes," and "Of Public Credit," Hume explains and defends a policy of free trade against the mercantile nationalism that was part of Whig ideology.

A theme running throughout the political essays is that some forms of government are better than others. This was argued in one of the earliest essays, "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science" and in "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," where Hume actually proposes an ideal republic. This essay is the last of the volume, and so has the rhetorical effect of being the wisdom of the whole, as perhaps it is.

Some of Hume's main observations about the effects of forms of civilized government are the following. Due to a higher and more widespread consciousness of the rule of law, modern republics and monar-

chies are more stable than ancient ones (E, 94). However, modern republics and limited monarchies, such as Britain, tend to be less stable than absolute monarchies (E, 492). Republics and limited monarchies are more given to factions (E, 55), and have a fatal tendency to public credit and mercantile wars which leads to an inordinate concentration of power in the capital with the consequent oppression of the provinces. Absolute monarchies also tend to public debt, but are better able to declare a bankruptcy in an emergency (E, 95-96). Republics and mixed monarchies are superior in promoting trade (E, 92). They are also superior in cultivating the sciences; whereas absolute monarchies tend to treat all subjects of the Crown equally and so are more liberal to their colonies than are republics and limited monarchies. These typically make distinctions in terms of citizenship and trade laws at the expense of the colonies. Hume compares, as an example, the oppressive treatment of Ireland by England with the more liberal treatment of its colonies by the absolute monarchy of France (E, 21). Perhaps this principle was in Hume's mind when, three years after the Stamp Act, he advocated complete independence for the American colonies, a position which had not yet occurred to most Americans (L, II, 184). Hume maintained this position until his death August 25, 1776, five days after news of the "Declaration of Ind'pendence" was published at Edinburgh in the *Caledonian Mercury*. Indeed, in the letters of the last ten years of his life, Hume seems to have thought that Britain should free all her colonies and follow a policy of free trade (L, II, 184, 210, 237, 300).

This purely causal analysis of forms of government carries thought beyond the moralistic and legalistic categories of the Whigs. It exploded the Whig mystique about the perfection of the British constitution and the longing for the virtue of ancient republics. Like any constitution, the British form of government has advantages and disadvantages. As a mixed constitution, its main disadvantage is instability. In "Of Passive Obedience," Hume observed that a mixed constitution such as Britain's is necessarily unstable because of its theory of "balanced" parts. The parts, in fact, will tend to fall out of balance. When this happens, the only recourse the other parts of the constitution may have will be the sword: "Resistance therefore must, of course, become more frequent in the BRITISH government, than in others, which are simpler, and consist of fewer parts and movements" (E, 492). It was in this way that Hume justified the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

Hume thought in 1741 that the British constitution was an eclectic discordant fabric that was poised to evolve into a pure republic or into a civilized absolute monarchy. He thought the greatest threat to the constitution was its inherent tendency to instability and civil war which was exacerbated by the conspiratorial style of whig politics. In "Whether the

British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," Hume expressed the belief and hope that the government would evolve into a civilized absolute monarchy rather than a republic. His reasons were historical and pragmatic: Given British history, the only sort of republic one could expect would be a latter day version of the oppressive republic of Cromwell.

Although Hume thought that civilized absolute monarchy best served the utilities of government under modern conditions, he always held to the republican ideal. In "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," he put forth a model republic as the ideal of government. Some have found this essay inexplicable, for how could Hume, the empiricist, argue for a utopia? The essay, however, does not formulate a utopia but is a splendid instance of the sort of critical reflection Hume calls true philosophy. Hume's model republic is not drawn from the point of view of a spectator of custom, but from the view of a participant. Hume compares it to Huygen's model of a ship which is the most commodious for sailing. Like the model of the perfect sailing vessel, Hume's model republic is an abstraction and stylization of actual practice. The modern world is an age of expanding commercial empires and large nation states. It is also an age in which republican prejudices (rule of law) have, to some degree, insensibly permeated the constitutions of even absolute monarchies. And finally it is an age in which everyone who is educated is educated in the Greek and Latin classics and has some respect for the classical republican virtues and heroes of antiquity. But the traditional wisdom was that republics are possible only in small states. A crucial advantage of absolute monarchy is that it can manage in an age of expanding commerce and large nation states. But given the strength of republican sentiment and opinion in the modern world, the question must eventually arise of how to reconcile liberty and authority in a large commercial republic. Hume's essay is the first attempt to answer this question.

Hume argued for "the falsehood of the common opinion, that no large state, such as France or Great Britain, could ever be modelled into a commonwealth, but that such a form of government can only take place in a city or small territory." Indeed, Hume went so far as to argue "the contrary seems probable." Though more difficult to establish in a large country, "there is more facility when once it is formed, of preserving it steady and uniform, without tumult and faction" (E, 527). Hume's solution was a federal hierarchy of electoral bodies ordered from the local to the national level, where each local unit is "a kind of republic within itself" having a certain degree of autonomy and the power to elect representatives to the higher levels. At the top would be a chamber of magistrates who would have the legislative power and a chamber of senators who would, among themselves, constitute an executive branch with a

presiding chief executive. The higher magistrates would be indirectly elected by the people through their elected representatives.

The U.S. Constitution was the first extensive republic, and it is well known that Madison and Hamilton put Hume's essay to work in their arguments for an American republican empire. Today most nations claim republican status and all wish to flourish at commerce. Hume's model republic then is not a utopia but an idealization of the civilizing forces at work in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. It is not a standard framed independent of custom, but one which grew out of forms of participation and which seeks to render them more coherent.

### **Barbarism and Philosophical Therapy**

We have seen that, for Hume, civilization is a reflective act: a process whereby the conventions of common life are raised to the level of critical self-consciousness. But this is just the same as Hume's description of the "true philosopher." The civilized man and the true philosopher are the same. As men become more civilized, they necessarily become more philosophical. As a convention for critically reflecting on conventions, philosophical thinking is internally connected to the other conventions of common life. A rudimentary sociology of knowledge is expressed in "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" and in "Of Refinement in the Arts." Hume observes that "industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together, by an indissolvable chain" (E, 271). And: "We cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected" (E, 270-71). Nor "can we expect that a government will be well modelled by a people, who know not how to make a spinning wheel, or to employ a loom to advantage" (E, 273). Hume thought that the cultivation of philosophy in modern times was responsible in large part for the superior stability of modern governments over ancient ones, and he hoped that further cultivation would lead to further improvements (EU, 10). But, as we have seen, Hume distinguished between true and false forms of philosophical reflection. Should false philosophy infect the affairs of common life, one would expect instability, not stability, to occur.

In section 2, we observed that false philosophical reflection is the result of an unrestrained use of the autonomy principle. The thinker vainly imagines himself to be not a participant in common life but a spectator of common life as *a whole*. From this position, he forms critical principles, unspotted by prejudice, by which the whole is judged. But since no one can free himself from the prejudices of common life, the false philosopher is victim of a terrible tension: on pain of losing his integrity as a

thinker, he must (yet he cannot) totally emancipate himself from the prejudices of common life. This existential tension explodes into the three forms of alienated philosophical existence discussed earlier. (1) revolutionary existence: emancipation through a total destruction and reconstruction of the conventions of common life. (2) ascetic existence: emancipation through total withdrawal. (3) guilty existence: emancipation through the punishment of self-disgust at being a participant in the prejudices of common life. These alienated forms of philosophical existence are a threat to the peace of mind of any individual or society infected by them.

Philosophical reflection is a convention for critically reflecting on all conventions using the principles of ultimacy and autonomy. Like any other convention, it has evolved and so its relation to society has not always been the same. Hume thought the modern age was the most philosophical that had ever been. It was an age in which the habit of critical reflection was no longer confined to the closets of a few but was becoming a mass phenomenon. This is confirmed by the very popularity of Hume's philosophical essays and the image of himself as an ambassador between the world of learning and that of conversation. But one should compare Hume's image of the philosopher as an ambassador between two autonomous domains with Diderot's image of the philosopher as a revolutionary marching the masses on to some philosophically determined goal: "Let us hasten to make philosophy popular. If we want the philosophers to march on before, let us approach the people at the point where the philosophers are."<sup>15</sup> Diderot considered philosophical reflection an unproblematic source of light exposing the prejudices of custom and tradition. Hume's careful distinction *within* the domain of philosophical reflection between true and false forms of criticism never occurred to Diderot, nor to the *philosophes* generally. Hume did not share Diderot's enthusiasm for making philosophy popular because he realized that the form of philosophical reflection most likely to dominate would be the false not the true. He thought, for instance, that the rationalistic theory of morals was a peculiarity of modern thought and a form of false philosophy. It flattered the intellectual vanity of what he dryly called "this philosophic age" (EM, 197n). Likewise, Hume viewed the contract theory not only as a modern phenomenon (though he recognized an early version of it in Socrates (E, 487) but a peculiarly English one as well.

Hume's criticism of the contract theory in "Of the Original Contract" exposes it as a case of false philosophy. Hume distinguished between the

15. Quoted in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Fritz Koelln and James Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 268-69.

ideal regime and the legitimate regime. He grants that where it can take place "consent of the people ... is surely the best and most sacred of any" foundation of government. His point, though, is that "it has very seldom had place in any degree, and never almost in its full extent. And therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted" (E, 474). This other foundation is the utility framed in settled opinion which is the slow product of time, circumstance, and necessity and which may take on as many forms as there are human cultures.

Being a philosophical theory, governed by the principles of ultimacy and autonomy, the contract theory can allow only one standard of legitimacy: consent of the people. By the principle of autonomy all existing conventions must be presumed false until certified by the theory. But the contract theory, free from the constraints of all custom, is entirely empty and may be used to certify all custom or none. As Hume writes: "there is no virtue or moral duty, but what may, with facility, be refined away, if we indulge a false philosophy, in sifting and scrutinizing it, by every captious rule of logic, in every light or position, in which it may be placed" (E, 482). But, equally, there is no custom that may not be *certified* by a false philosophy. Cut loose from the constraints of custom and participation there is no non-arbitrary way to apply the contract theory. And so it must be rejected, not because its criticism is too radical but because it renders criticism impossible. Nor is there any non-arbitrary way to select a set of customs which could give content to the theory. There is no rational escape from the path of true philosophy: one must accept the autonomy of custom and work out criticism from within actual orders of participation.

The contract theory is not only vacuous and arbitrary as criticism, it is dangerous as well because it alienates thought from the orders of legitimacy in the world. Thus Hume quotes Locke as driven to the absurdity "that absolute monarchy is inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all" (E, 487). He could also have quoted Algernon Sidney, another Whig contractarian hero: "Whatever ... proceeds not from the consent of the people, must be 'de facto' only, that is void of all right." But the fires kindled here for absolute monarchy could equally be placed under the mixed regime of Britain or the republican regime of Holland, or, indeed, any regime that the most whimsical imagination can assign. It was *loyalty* to their own order of participation and not any *logical* constraints of the theory that prevented Locke and Sidney from drawing the same nihilistic conclusions about their favorite regimes. This, of course, is not to say that these regimes did not have virtues lacking in the absolute monarchy of France. But that discovery is not possible unless one assumes the autonomy of custom. Doing this, Hume found, as we saw earlier, that the absolute monarchy of France is

not only legitimate but has advantages as well as disadvantages when compared to modern republican and mixed regimes.

As a form of false philosophy, the contract theory gives rise to the three forms of alienated philosophical existence. The revolutionary philosopher, confronted with the perception that existing regimes are not really based on consent of the people, is driven to attempt the total destruction and transformation of the world. The ascetic philosopher, confronted with the same perception, attempts to totally withdraw from politics. The guilty philosopher, again having the same perception but lacking the courage of his convictions, lives out an uneasy compromise between the world of illegitimacy and his own participation. Each of these forms may exist in the same mind at different times or, as usually happens, they can be blended together into as many forms of political existence as the primary colors can yield a variety of hues.

Contract theorists, such as Locke, are not rigorous theorists but are so sunk in their own orders of participation that they do not confuse the dictates of philosophical theory with reality. This explains, in part, Locke's notorious lack of clarity and consistency. But whatever may be said of the *men* who have proposed the contract theory (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Rawls), the theory itself is dangerous, for philosophical theory logically requires total emancipation from prejudice and custom; otherwise it is not *philosophical* theory. There have always been philosophical outriders who have taken the theory seriously and, in thought, have magically transformed the participation of common life into the category of illusion. Thus the contract theory was part of the conceptual framework that made possible the logic and rhetoric of the French Revolution. And so a member of the French National Assembly could demand not the *reforms* which true philosophy may require but the total destruction and transformation of false philosophy: "All the establishments in France crown the unhappiness of the people: to make them happy they must be renewed, their ideas, their laws, their customs must be changed; . . . men changed, things changed, words changed . . . destroy everything; yes destroy everything; then everything is to be renewed."<sup>16</sup> No major contract theorist has been a true revolutionary; most have been content with some form of fellow travelling which itself is a form of guilty philosophical existence. But it has always been a pleasure to see one's philosophical theory instantiated in the world. Thus Kant could admire the French Revolution as an instrument for bringing about a fuller realization in the world of his own moral and political theories. He lamented the "excess" (as if one could will the end

16. Quoted in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Thomas Mahoney (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1982), 196.



without the means) but, like many philosophers since, could lightly reflect that a few heads must be cracked to make an omelette.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the infusion of false philosophical criticism into politics had become a mass phenomenon. Marx could write to Ruge in 1843 that "the philosophical consciousness itself has been pulled into the torment of struggle."<sup>17</sup> What must be accomplished is the "ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless also in the sense that criticism does not fear its results and even less so a struggle with the existing powers."<sup>18</sup> And later in addressing the Communist party on tactics, Marx uses the same language of total destruction and total transformation: "We are not interested in a change in private property but only in its annihilation, not in conciliation of class antagonisms but in the abolition of classes, not in reforms of present society but in the foundation of a new one."<sup>19</sup>

In the *Rebel*, Albert Camus works out something very like Hume's project of purging politics of false philosophical consciousness: "There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. . . . We are living in the era of . . . the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults, and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges . . . slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy . . . in one sense cripple judgment. On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself."<sup>20</sup>

This peculiar transposition or "crime of logic" to which Camus refers, though more widespread in the twentieth century, is not peculiar to it. Hume seems the first to have pointed it out. It first appears in the *Treatise* as the distinction between true and false philosophy. False philosophy magically transforms ordinary concepts such as justice and benevolence into their opposites: benevolence is really self-love; property is really theft, etc. Hume describes this as "philosophical chymistry" (alchemy) and in the essay "The Sceptic" likens the false philosopher to a worker in black magic: "Do you come to a philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion?" (EM, 297; E, 161). We have here a peculiar sort of superstition, born not of religion but of the

17. Karl Marx on Revolution, 13 vols., ed. and trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), I, 516.

18. Ibid.

19. Quoted in Eric Voegelin, "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *The Review of Politics*, 12: 301.

20. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 23.

critical intellect itself. Michael Oakeshott once observed that everything Marx touched turned to superstition. But what we may learn from Hume is that everything that false philosophical consciousness touches turns to superstition, and that is much of modern political thinking.

Hume was aware that politics in his time was just beginning to be captured by false philosophical consciousness. In "Of the Original Contract," he lamented the fact that "no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one" (E, 465). Since the elite of the ancient and modern philosophical tradition had been informed, for the most part, by false philosophical consciousness, one could expect no more of the newly formed philosophical consciousness of the vulgar: "The people being commonly very rude builders, especially in this speculative way, and more especially still, when actuated by party-zeal; it is natural to imagine, that their workmanship must be a little unshapely, and discover evident marks of that violence and hurry, in which it was raised" (E, 466).

How did this popular philosophical consciousness come to be? Hume answers this question in the remarkable essay "Of Parties in General." Here he puts forth a prophetic view of modern ideological politics. He distinguished between three sorts of political party: parties of interest, affection, and metaphysical principle. Parties of interest such as the division between "the landed and trading part of the nation" are the most reasonable, and the most excusable. "Parties of affection such as an attachment to a particular ruling family, though not as reasonable, are still understandable. But parties based on metaphysical principle are absurdities, and, moreover, are unique to modern times: "Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phenomenon* that has yet appeared in human affairs" (E, 60). The absurdity of modern parties of philosophical principle is just that they are informed by false philosophical consciousness and transform the orders of participation into the category of illusion.

Why are philosophical political parties unique to modern times? Hume's answer is original. He distinguishes between religion prior to the appearance of philosophical consciousness in human affairs and religion after its appearance. Pre-philosophic religion consisted "mostly of traditional tales and fictions, which maybe different in every sect, without being contrary to each other; and even when they are contrary, every one adheres to the tradition of his own sect, without much reasoning or disputation" (E, 62). But Christianity arose when "philosophy was widely spread over the world." The teachers of the new sect were, therefore, "obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with

some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science" (E, 62). Hume concludes with the remarkable observation that "Sects of philosophy, in the ancient world, were more zealous than parties of religion; but in modern times, parties of religion are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition" (E, 63).

But we must be careful to observe that it is the *philosophical* content of modern religion, due to the historic merger of philosophy and Christianity, that renders modern religion fanatical. And so Hume can say in the *Enquiry* on understanding that "religion ... is nothing but a species of philosophy" (EU, 146). In *The Natural History of Religion*, Protestants are compared to "the Stoics," who "join a philosophical enthusiasm to a religious superstition" (NHR, 63). And in the Stuart volumes of the *History*, Hume interprets the English Civil War roughly in the way Burke interpreted the French Revolution: as a violent intrusion of misplaced philosophical criticism in politics. The philosophical fanaticism of false philosophy (what Hume calls "philosophical enthusiasm") is just below the surface of Puritan religious ideology: Puritanism, "being chiefly spiritual, resembles more a system of metaphysics" (H, IV, 14).

In "Of Parties in General," Hume introduces a new principle of philosophical consciousness not mentioned in the *Treatise*: such is the nature of the human mind, that it always lays hold on every mind that approaches it; and as it is wonderfully fortified by an unanimity of sentiments, so is it shocked and disturbed by any contrariety. Hence the eagerness, which most people discover in a dispute; and hence their impatience of opposition, even in the most speculative and indifferent opinions" (E, 61). We may call this the principle of *dominion*, and it is an essential constituent of philosophical consciousness, along with the ultimacy principle and the autonomy principle. Thought, aimed at the ultimate and imagining itself autonomous, must believe in its title to rule. As Plato taught, philosophers should be kings. Hume's reform in philosophy requires that we abandon the radical form of the autonomy principle in favor of the autonomy of custom. Critical reflection *within* the domain of custom now emerges as a better guide to life than autonomous reason. From this point of view, the principle of dominion loses its force, for custom is historical and social, and so requires deference to others.

It was a consciousness formed by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion that made philosophical sects in the ancient world more fanatical than religious ones, and it is the survival of this same philosophical consciousness in modern religion that makes it fanatical. Such a mind necessarily issues in *total criticism* and, if unchecked by custom, seeks total control. Hence, Hume's characterization of "the modern [philosophically informed] religion," which, he says, "inspects

our whole conduct, and prescribes an universal rule to our actions, to our words, to our very thoughts and inclinations" (EM, 341-43). Hume observed this attempt at total control among the Puritan revolutionaries in the Stuart volumes of the *History* dealing with the English Civil War. He would have understood perfectly the logic of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.

The prevalence of false philosophical consciousness in the modern world poses a threat not only to society but to the peace of mind of the individual as well. Hume discusses Diogenes as an ancient example and Pascal as a modern one of how false philosophical reflection can lead to an "artificial life" in total alienation from the usual maxims of participation. Both are examples of what we have called ascetic philosophical existence. Such existence is lived not in the open air of participation but "in a vacuum" and is the result of "the illusions" of "extravagant philosophy" and of "philosophical enthusiasm" (EM, 341-43).

The destructive effects of false philosophical consciousness on the life of the individual is taken up in the essay "Of Moral Prejudices" where Hume charts the unhappy fate of an eighteenth-century feminist ("Our Philosophical Heroine") who contracts to have a child without the burdens of husband or family. Hume warns against departing "too far from the received maxims of conduct and behaviour" and against "that grave philosophic endeavour after perfection" (E, 542, 539). The general question of the good life is taken up in "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic." This quartet of essays, which has received virtually no commentary, explores the question of what constitutes the good life by passing, in order, through four forms of philosophical consciousness: the Epicurean, the stoical, the Platonic, and the skeptical. The essays are arranged dialectically in ascending order of degrees of self-consciousness. The highest order of critical self-awareness is the mind of the skeptic or "true philosophy." The dialectical pattern here regarding the question of the good life is the same as that regarding the question of our knowledge of the external world in the *Treatise* (Book I, Part IV, sections ii, iii-iv) where Hume first introduced the distinction between true and false philosophy.

It is common to explain modern political ideologies and totalitarian regimes as expressions of the religious mind. There are obvious similarities between an ideology such as Marxism and Christianity. Hume himself distinguished between "religious Whigs" and "political Whigs."<sup>21</sup> The latter is "a Man of Sense and Moderation, a Lover of Laws

21. See *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, Esq: late Lord Provost of Edinburgh*, In a Letter to a Friend, published by Hume anonymously (London, 1748).

and Liberty;" the former, however, makes a religion out of liberty and takes on the character of the worst religious dogmatism, bigotry, and persecution. But if we take seriously Hume's theory of the natural history of philosophical consciousness, another explanation presents itself; namely that the rationale of modern political ideologies is internal to philosophical consciousness itself. Ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion are principles of the philosophical mind, independent of religion. Hume observed in the *Treatise* that the ancient cynics are an "instance of philosophers who from reasonings purely philosophical ran into as great extravagancies of conduct as any Monk or Dervise that ever was in the world" (T, 272). We may recall also Hume's observation that ancient philosophical sects were more fanatical than religious ones and that the fanaticism of modern religion is due to its philosophical content. Hume's attack on modern religion is not an attack on the idea of the sacred and the divine but on the false philosophical consciousness that has captured modern religion. In the *Enquiry* on understanding, the attack is explicitly said to be the "religious philosophers," not "the tradition of your forefathers and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce)" (EU, 135). Hume's concern is more to de-philosophize religion than to de-mythologize it.

As his career developed, Hume began to see that the secular philosophical consciousness that was replacing the religious philosophical consciousness was taking on the form of false philosophy. This awareness is expressed in the *Essays*, but especially in the letters of the last decade of his life concerning the constitutional crisis in Britain which included, among other things, the Wilkes and Liberty riots of 1768-71 and war with the American colonies. The fanaticism of secular philosophical sects in the ancient world, which had been contained to the private sphere by the civic religion, was now being reenacted in the modern world in the public sphere. Though legitimate conflicts of interest were involved, Hume thought the crisis was due mainly to the alienating power of false philosophical consciousness. Men were tearing the constitution apart in the name of philosophical theories of liberty, rights, and government. Here was something new. The problem now was not those favorite enemies of the Enlightenment (ignorance, superstition, and religion) which could be cured by philosophical reflection. The philosophical intellect itself had become the problem. Hume makes just this point in a letter to Hugh Blair, March, 1769, where he compares the secular philosophical thinking of the present constitutional crisis with the religious thinking of the seventeenth-century Puritan revolutionaries. The present crisis, Hume says, "exceeds the absurdity of Titus Oates and the Popish Plot; and is so much more disgraceful to the Nation, as the former Folly, being derived from Religion, flow'd from a

Source, which has, from uniform Prescription, acquir'd a Right to impose Nonsense on all Nations and all Ages" (L, II, 197).

In the letters of the last decade of his life, concerning the constitutional crisis, Hume regularly describes the English as *barbarous*. We have discussed Hume's notion of civilization as a philosophic act whereby pre-reflective conventions are brought to the level of self-consciousness. The more civilized an age becomes the more philosophically reflective it becomes. The barbarian, lacking self-reflection, is in a state of ignorance. He destroys, out of ignorance, a civilized world he does not understand. But when Hume describes the English as barbarians, he does not mean a barbarism of ignorance but a barbarism of critical reflection: a special kind of barbarism possible only in a civilized age where false philosophical consciousness could create a kind of self-imposed ignorance and stupidity. Men were destroying the most liberal regime the world had known in the name of "liberty."

When Hume says the English are sunk in "Barbarism and Faction," he means the worst sort of faction, not factions of interest or affection but factions of the sort "known only to modern times," namely factions of philosophical principle. The barbarism is *English* because Whig ideology has become part of English self-professed national identity. An important part of this ideology was the contract theory which, Hume, the Scotsman, thought, had insinuated itself into popular English political consciousness. It was and is a fetching theory, and Hume regretted that something of it had infected the first volume of his *History*, which he says was "too full of those foolish English prejudices, which all Nations and all Ages disavow" (L, II, 216). In "Of the Original Contract," he went out of his way to observe that as the foundation of political legitimacy, it is rejected "in every place but this single kingdom ..." (E, 487).

The barbarism which Hume discovered in English civilization bears some affinity to Vico's "barbarism of reflection," the last and decadent stage of his ideal three-stage history of civilization.<sup>22</sup> Through philosophical reflection, men, in this last stage, become increasingly alienated from the pre-reflective, poetic order of common life and finally destroy it. Unlike Vico, Hume does not think it possible to conceive of history as *a whole*. History is and must remain open and contingent. But Hume does think of the process of civilization as a philosophic act. Since false philosophical consciousness is an ever-present possibility, the process of civilization harbors the means of its own destruction within the reflective act itself.

The new barbarian is alienated from his own participation in common

22. Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981). See Chapter Seven "Wisdom and Barbarism."

life. He mistakenly imagines himself to be identical to the theoretical objects of his own false philosophical consciousness. Since this ignorance is self-imposed and is certified by what is thought to be *reason*, it is difficult for the thinker to detect his own alienated condition. Special rhetorical arts are needed. In "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" and in "Of Eloquence," Hume insists on the importance of cultivating a taste founded on sentiment instead of reflection. He argues that oratory and eloquence are the only arts in which the ancients are superior to the moderns. Modern eloquence is an eloquence of critical reflection and so is popular in an age which flatters itself on its rationality. But such a rhetorical climate is a catalyst for false philosophical consciousness which obscures and constricts the human substance; that is, primordial participation in common life. Communication at this level is communication of sentiments. And it is important that the rhetoric of language and speech be shaped to keep us aware of ourselves as primordial participants.

A mind trapped in the seamless whole of false philosophical consciousness is not susceptible to propositional argument, for by virtue of the ultimacy and autonomy principles, philosophical disagreements are *ultimate* disagreements. Only a rhetoric of sentiment has a chance of breaking through to remind the self-enclosed consciousness about its primordial participation. This is the rhetoric Hume follows in "Of the Original Contract." He argues that the contract theory cannot be true because it runs afoul of the established practice of the world, and he describes this practice in some detail. This has been disappointing to many because Hume seems to be confusing the *normative* question about what ought to count as legitimate government with the *factual* question of what people think counts as legitimacy. But there is no confusion here. If the contract theory is a case of false philosophy, as Hume thinks it is, then the task of the true philosopher is not to argue for a contrary norm but to show that norms framed independent of the autonomy of custom are vacuous and can only be arbitrarily applied. The true philosopher tries to bring the alienated theorist back to common life by reminders of who he is. The rhetoric of true philosophy, at its deepest reach, is a rhetoric of the *reminder*, the recollection of primordial participation.

It is significant that John Home, Hume's cousin and one of the Edinburgh *literati*, thought that one of Hume's greatest merits as a writer was the cultivation of a literary taste founded on sentiment as opposed to critical reflection. In "A Sketch of the Character of Mr. Hume" written after Hume's death, Home compares Hume favorably to Aristotle. Both were great philosophers who explored a vast range of topics, and both were men of the world. Hume, however, was a great historian. But what gives Hume the edge is that Aristotle "was void of elegance as a writer,

and if we mistake not wanted taste: for the taste which he discovers is that which arises from reason and reflection, not that which flows from an internal sense.

We live in what might be called the first philosophic age; that is, an age in which philosophical reflection, heretofore the possession of an elite, has become a mass phenomenon. Our political world is and has been a world of contrary philosophical systems hungry for instantiation in the world: liberalism, fascism, conservatism, socialism, communism, and so forth. To these we may add countless projects of "unmasking" and "consciousness-raising" such as feminism, deconstructionism, etc., Hume anticipated something of this condition in the essay "Of Moral Prejudices": "There is a Set of Men lately sprung up amongst us, who endeavour to distinguish themselves by ridiculing every Thing, that has hitherto appeared sacred and venerable in the Eyes of Mankind. Reason, Sobriety, Honour, Friendship, Marriage, are the perpetual Subjects of their insipid Raillery: And even public Spirit, and a Regard to our Country, are treated as chimerical and romantic" (E, 538). Hume significantly calls these "Anti-reformers." It is also perhaps worth pointing out that, for Hume, "prejudice" is something to be affirmed ("Sentiments, or Prejudices, if you will") and is an avenue to truth, not, as in current understanding, a barrier to truth.

But can we not "unmask" some of the "unmaskers" and raise the consciousness of some of the "consciousness raisers"? In an age captured by false philosophical consciousness, a new Enlightenment is needed. This time, however, the source of darkness is not religion, tradition, or prejudice but the critical intellect itself. However, once men reach the stage of philosophical reflection, there is no turning back to a pre-reflective state. The only remedy is to develop the special rhetorical arts needed to teach the distinction between true and false philosophical criticism on a popular level. Hume seems the first to have understood this project, and the *Essays* were his instrument for carrying it out.

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## Appendix

The following is a complete list of the essays written by Hume. Unless indicated otherwise the date in parentheses after each essay is the edition in which it was first published. For a discussion of the history of the editions, see the "Foreword" in the Eugene Miller edition of the *Essays* published by Liberty Classics. Miller has also provided variant readings of essays Hume changed through various editions and very helpful footnotes throughout the essays on historical and conceptual matters that need clarification.

Essays, Moral, Political & Literary  
(published posthumously in 1777 with Hume's latest corrections)

### PART I

- I Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion (1741)
- II Of the Liberty of the Press (1741)
- III That Politics may be reduced to a Science (1741)
- IV Of the First Principles of Government (1741)
- V Of the Origin of Government (1777)
- VI Of the Independency of Parliament (1741)
- VII Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute  
Monarchy, or to a Republic (1741)
- VIII Of Parties in General (1741)
- IX Of the Parties of Great Britain (1741)
- X Of Superstition and Enthusiasm (1741)
- XI Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature (1741)
- XII Of Civil Liberty (1741)
- XIII Of Eloquence (1742)
- XIV Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences (1742)
- XV The Epicurean (1742)
- XVI The Stoic (1742)
- XVII The Platonist (1742)
- XVIII The Sceptic (1742)
- XIX Of Polygamy and Divorces (1742)
- XX Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing (1742)
- XXI Of National Characters (1748)
- XXII Of Tragedy (1758)
- XXIII Of the Standard of Taste (1758)

### PART II

- I Of Commerce (1752)
- II Of Refinement in the Arts (1752)
- III Of Money (1752)
- IV Of Interest (1752)
- V Of the Balance of Trade (1752)
- VI Of the Jealousy of Trade (1758)
- VII Of the Balance of Power (1752)
- VIII Of Taxes (1752)
- IX Of Public Credit (1752)
- X Of some Remarkable Customs (1752)
- XI Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations (1752)

- XII Of the Original Contract (1748)
- XIII Of Passive Obedience (1748)
- XIV Of the Coalition of Parties (1758)
- XV Of the Protestant Succession (1752)
- XVI Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth (1752)

#### ESSAYS WITHDRAWN

- I " Of Essay Writing (published only in 1742 edition)
- II Of Moral Prejudices (published only in 1742 edition)
- III Of the Middle Station of Life (published only in 1742 edition)
- IV Of Impudence and Modesty (1741, dropped after 1760 edition)
- V Of Love and Marriage (1741, dropped after 1760 edition)
- VI Of the Study of History (1741, dropped after 1760 edition)
- VII Of Avarice (1741, dropped after 1768 edition)
- VIII A Character of Sir Robert Walpole (1742, dropped after 1768 edition)

#### ESSAYS UNPUBLISHED IN HUME'S LIFETIME

- I Of Suicide (arranged by Hume for publication after his death)
- II Of the Immortality of the Soul (arranged by Hume for publication after his death)