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R. J. Glossop

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HUME AND THE FUTURE OF THE SOCIETY OF NATIONS

In the section of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature entitled *Of the laws of nations* (Section XI of Book III) he says:

*Political writers tell us, that in every kind of intercourse, a body politic is to be consider'd as one person; and indeed this assertion is so far just, that different nations, as well as private persons, require mutual assistance; at the same time that their selfishness and ambition are perpetual sources of war and discord. But tho' nations in this particular resemble individuals, yet as they are very different in other respects, no wonder they regulate themselves by different maxims, and give rise to a new set of rules, which we call the laws of nations.*¹

He goes on to give examples of such laws: *the sacredness of the persons of ambassadors, the declaration of war, the abstaining from poison'd arms, with other duties of that kind, which are evidently calculated for the commerce, that is peculiar to different societies.* (T 567)

Hume then tells us in the next paragraph that such laws of nations may be added to the three laws of nature (that possessions should be stable, that possessions should be transferable by consent, and that promises or contracts should be kept) but that these laws of nations do not supersede the laws of nature; that is, they do not make the laws of nature irrelevant to relations among nation-states. In fact, the morality among nation-states involves the same kinds of obligations as morality among private persons, but the obligations are not as binding. The obligations of nation-states to each other can more readily be overridden by concerns of self-interest than would be legitimate in the case of private persons because nation-states are more nearly able to maintain themselves without external assistance than are individual persons. In Hume's words, ... *tho' the*

morality of princes has the same extent, yet it has not the same force as that of private persons (T 568) because tho' the intercourse of different states be advantageous, and even sometimes necessary, yet it is not so necessary nor advantageous as that among individuals, without which 'tis utterly impossible for human nature ever to subsist. (T 569)

In the last paragraph of this section Hume addresses himself to the question of the proportion these two species of morality bear to each other. (T 569) He says that *we can never give any precise answer* (T 569) and that the proper proportion is exhibited in the actual practice of the world. He takes this fact as showing that all men recognize that the rules of morality, both among private individuals and among nation-states, *arise from human conventions, and from the interest, which we have in the preservation of peace and order.* (T 569) When discussing the same issue in his Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals Hume is more succinct.

The observance of justice, though useful among them [nations], is not guarded by so strong a necessity as among individuals; and the moral obligation holds proportion with the usefulness.²

The moral obligations of individuals to each other is thus greater than that of nations to each other because keeping the rules of justice is more useful in the former case than in the latter.

But Hume did not live in an age of atomic weapons, long-range missiles, and precision-guided munitions. Furthermore, the nations of the world are now much more interdependent than in his day, not only with regard to where they get the resources they need but also with regard to what they do with their wastes. There seems to be little room for doubt that the utility of following the rules of justice among nations is much greater now than it was in the eighteenth

century. Since a nuclear war might mean the end of the human species, the utility of justice among nations seems to be approaching, perhaps even surpassing, the utility which moral rules have at the level of private persons. In view of this changed situation, I intend to review what Hume has to say about the rules of justice and the origin of government among men with a view to what his remarks imply about the present and future of relations among nations when each *body politic* is ... *consider'd as one person*. In particular I want to raise the question of whether, according to Hume's views, we can expect the nation-states eventually to form a government on the world level to regulate their dealings with each other as has occurred at the level of local and national governments to regulate dealings among individuals.

In the Section of the Treatise entitled *Of the origin of justice and property* (Section II of Part II of Book III) Hume observes that society provides individual persons collectively with more power, ability, and security than would be possible if each person looked out only for himself. These same advantages seem to accrue to nations, especially smaller ones, when they become a member of the society of nations. A society of nations has more power against both nature and other nations than if each nation were to struggle completely on its own. A society of nations also provides the opportunity for specialization in the production of goods on the basis of resources, climate, and the like. And a society of nations provides greater security for its members. Nations, unlike individual persons, do not have sexual attraction toward each other which eventually produces common offspring; but some of them do have cultural and ideological affinities for each other, and some nations are in a manner "offspring" of others. For example,

one can readily view the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as cultural offspring of Britain. Where bonds of affection or cultural similarities exist, there is some impetus toward a society of at least limited scope.

Hume notes that there are, however, important natural tendencies working against the formation of a broader society even on the level of private persons. These include selfishness (paralleled by concern for the national interest) and limited benevolence (paralleled by concern for allies and ideological partners). Yet these alone *wou'd be attended with but small danger* (T 487) were it not for the fact that the goods of nature, which one may take from others without destroying their value, are not available in an amount that permits everyone to have all he wants. In the same way, if all the nations of the earth had all the resources they could want, then nationalism and ideological differences would not make the danger of violent conflict between nations so great.

There is only one thing according to Hume which can bring about the move away from selfishness, partiality, and violence to a society which is generally peaceful. The remedy is *in the judgment and understanding* (T 489) which leads people (and nations) to *become sensible of the infinite advantages that result from it* [society].(T 489) The preservation of society requires that external goods be put

as far as possible, on the same footing with the fix'd and constant advantages of mind and body. This can be done after no other manner, than by a convention enter'd into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry. (T 489)

On the international level, this convention would consist of a recognition that all nations have control over whatever goods exist or may be found within their national boundaries. The more powerful nations seem to have recognized such a principle with regard to each other for some time, and since the end of World War II it seems that the principle is gradually being extended even to former colonies. But, as Hume notes, the convention regarding stability of possessions is *not of the nature of a promise* (T 490) (or, in the case of nations, a treaty) but rather *arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it.* (T 490)

If Hume's view of the matter is adopted, the nations of the world come gradually to an acceptance of the rule that each nation should abstain from trying to take what belongs to another nation, and consequently the notions of "just" and "unjust" gradually become applicable to nation-states. Nations come to be regarded as having property, property rights, and obligations not to steal from other nations. A situation develops where nations can actually negotiate, as they have been doing in the U.N. Law of the Sea Conference, about property rights with regard to things such as the resources of the ocean seabed which are not within the boundaries of any nation-state. But nations reach this point not by virtue of any love or regard for other nations but purely by a calculation of their own national interests.

There is no passion ... capable of controlling the interested affection [which on the international level is represented by the pursuit of the national interest], but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction [I]n preserving society [including the society of nations], we make much greater advances in the acquiring possessions, than in the solitary and forlorn

condition, which must follow upon violence and an universal license. (T 492)

Hume then observes that if the rule for the stability of possessions be very abstruse, and of difficult invention; society must be esteem'd, in a manner, accidental, and the effect of many ages. (T 493) Hume argues that, with regard to individuals, existence outside of society for any length of time would be utterly impossible and that consequently Hobbes's supposed state of nature must be a mere philosophical fiction. (T 493) On the other hand, it seems that nations were able to exist for some time in a Hobbesian state of nature, though it is worthwhile in this connection to note that since the Middle Ages a shift has occurred from a situation where nations were considered to be at war with each other unless they had concluded a peace agreement to a situation where nations are considered to be at peace with each other unless they have declared war on each other.³ Only the earlier state of affairs would seem to fulfill Hobbes's notion of a state of war. There have been long-lasting national rivalries, but that is a bit different from a situation where every nation is regarded as being at war with every other nation. Actually nations have been gradually moving toward a state of society which includes all nations for some time. Whenever nations sign treaties with each other, there is already some rudimentary form of society between them or the treaty would be pointless just as with regard to individuals a promise would be pointless unless the parties involved have some basis for expecting the promise to be fulfilled. (T 521) The gradual growth of international law with regard to immunity of ambassadors, what is permissible in war, treatment of prisoners, and so on indicates the existence of an evolving society of nations. The creation of the League of Nations and then the United Nations is further evidence of an evolving

society of nations which are very far from being in a state of war with each other even though formally each still maintains full national sovereignty.

Can we expect further evolution of this society of nations? Specifically, can we expect the development of a world government over the national governments? If so, how? Let us see what kinds of answers are provided to these questions by Hume's political philosophy. We will focus our attention on Section VII of Part II of Book III of the Treatise of Human Nature entitled *Of the origin of government*.

Hume notes that if people always acted in accord with their long-term self-interest, there would be no violations of the rules of justice which are so essential to the preservation of society. There would be no need for government. The same principle seems to apply to nation-states. If they were to pursue their long-term national interest, they would not attempt to take territory from other nations. They would not break their treaties. As the costs of weapons and the extent of destruction to be suffered during war increases, it would seem that nations generally will be ever more reluctant to take actions which violate the rules of justice and the accepted laws of nations. But still some nations may be enticed by the promise of short-term gain to break the laws of nature and/or the laws of nations. The case is not essentially different from that of individuals. And whether we are dealing with individuals or with nations, if the lawbreakers succeed in advancing their self-interest at the expense of these laws, then others will be tempted to do likewise. Then those who obey the laws, whether individuals or nations, would become the dupes of those who disobey them.

What can be done to keep the law-breaking under control? Hume notes that at first glance no remedy

seems possible because any action to resolve the problem will require the consent of those very beings whose nature prefers the goods which are near at hand to those which are more remote. People (and nations, too, it seems) are able to see that they would be better off if they would be able to pursue steadily their long-term interests, but their own nature to be attracted to short-term goods thwarts them. *The utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest* (T 537) by establishing civil magistrates and other government officials to enforce the rules of justice. The parallel move with regard to the society of nations seems to involve giving particular national governments the task of enforcing international law. The Security Council of the United Nations could be seen as a feeble effort to get some nations to play this role of being the enforcers of international law. The difficulty is that many nations represented on the Security Council do not have that disinterestedness which Hume attributes to civil magistrates.

If there were to be some enforcers of international law, it seems they would need to be individual persons rather than national governments, even though these individuals might to some extent be chosen according to nationality. Furthermore, it seems that the enforcement of international law would need to focus on the arrest and punishment of particular national leaders who violate the law rather than trying to arrest and punish national governments. But despite some dissimilarities, Hume's general principles still seem applicable. Attempts to further short-term national interests at the expense of international law would be headed off by the prospect of punishment for the leaders responsible for such a violation. From the point of view of long-term self-interest such a devel-

opment should appear advantageous to all national governments. The alternative is constant preparation for and danger of war.

But despite the attractiveness of the idea of a government at the world level to enforce international law, it is noteworthy that for Hume, even at the level of individuals, government, regardless of its great utility, is not a necessity.

The state of society without government is one of the most natural states of men, and must subsist with the conjunction of many families, and long after the first generation. (T 541)

In fact, Hume indicates that governments probably begin not as a result of trying to control conflict within the society but as a result of conflict with an external enemy. (T 539-40) In the absence of an external attack, internal social pressures seem sufficient to maintain obedience to the laws of nature and the customs of the group, so government is not necessary. But in the face of an external attack individuals may seek to escape from the dangerous tasks of defense which are necessary for the preservation of the society. Then government of some kind may be formed to enforce the law that all must participate in the struggle to preserve the society regardless of the personal danger involved.

If we apply these ideas to the international sphere, the most likely kind of supranational government would be one which comes about among the nations of a military alliance as the result of an effort to assure that all will fight together in opposition to a common enemy. Thus the nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or of the Warsaw Pact might be united under a single government in order to secure more reliable cooperation in the event of a common military effort. On the basis of Hume's views a totally inclusive world government is not likely except in

response to an external attack on the planet as a whole from outer space.⁴ Such an external attack in which the nations of the earth are all targets of the attackers would undoubtedly require a cooperative effort of the various national governments that might, if it lasted long enough, produce some kind of world governmental structure over the present national governments. If one follows Hume's political philosophy, such an external attack seems to be about the only thing that would be likely to produce a world government. Once such a government did come into being, however, the leaders of that newly created world government would be able to carry out projects for the general welfare which otherwise would never have been possible. (T 538-39)

Hume's remarks do suggest one other situation that might lead to the creation of a world government over the national governments, namely, material abundance. He says, *Nothing but an encrease of riches and possessions cou'd oblige men to quit it* [a state of society without government]. (T 541) Hume seems to think that when there is an abundance of wealth the amount of riches and possessions may become so considerable as to make them [some of the members of society] forget, on every emergence, the interest they have in the preservation of peace and justice. (T540) The greater the riches, the greater is the pull of the imagination to take the present goods without considering long-term consequences. Consequently, government becomes more essential as a device to counteract the increasing attractiveness of the goods which may be acquired by violating the laws of nature. The need for government under these circumstances would be especially apparent to those who have a great deal of wealth which might be confiscated by some other nation-state.

Wealthy nation-states almost always have sufficient military power to protect their property from other nation-states, but there are some other wealthy actors on the international scene, not foreseen at all by Hume, who would find a world government over the nation-states rather helpful. I am referring, of course, to multinational corporations.⁵ If some nation decides to nationalize the assets of a multinational corporation that lie within its borders, what can the corporations do? It may be able to get some of the other governments to exert some pressure on the national government that thus "steals" these assets, and it may be able to get other multinational corporations to cease investing within the territory of the offending nation-states; but it is possible that the threat of such actions would not be sufficient to deter the "theft" of valuable property, and it is also possible that no nation-state would be willing to go to war against the offending nation-state in order to protect the property of a multinational corporation. Such possibilities might well lead multinational corporations to seek to promote the development of a government over the nation-states that would protect their investments. The socialist countries would almost certainly object to such a system, however, and it is quite possible that measures short of creating a world government could be established to handle this problem.

If Hume's views about the origin of government are correct, the likelihood of the creation of a world government over the nation-states is very remote. A cooperative system such as the United Nations in which each nation retains its national sovereignty is about as much of a government as we can expect for the society of nations in the foreseeable future. The laws of nature and the laws of the nations will probably

gradually acquire more force as the tradition of obeying them becomes better and better established. Special international agencies such as the World Health Organization, the Universal Postal Union, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and others will be continued with still others being added as needed. Additional treaties concerning trade and limitations of arms will be adopted. But radical change is unlikely unless a catastrophe occurs. As Hume says:

Though government be an invention very advantageous, and even in some circumstances absolutely necessary to mankind; it is not necessary in all circumstances, nor is it impossible for men to preserve society for some time, without having recourse to such an invention. (T 539)

Humanity might indeed be better off if a world government were created, but people and nation-states are guided generally not by ideas about what is best for everyone in the long run but rather by the pursuit of their own rather immediate interests. Sovereignty will be yielded only when failure to do so obviously threatens one's own survival, and the nations are not likely to believe that their survival is threatened until and unless a nuclear war occurs. If such an event took place, then perhaps a move to a world government on the part of whatever society of nations remains might be seriously considered. But regardless of the benefits which could be expected from a world government, a more likely scenario, if Hume's observations about the origin of government are accepted as correct, is that the society of nations will continue gradually to develop various conventions and customs and treaties which will enable them to pursue their national interests without too much external interference from the governments of other nations.

R.J. Glossop
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville

1. David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 567. Hereafter this work will be referred to by the abbreviation "T".
2. David Hume, Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 2nd ed., edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 206.
3. Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th edition, "International Law," Volume 9, p. 745.
4. It could be argued that the danger of a nuclear war which would wipe out a large portion of the earth's inhabitants could be viewed as an "external enemy" requiring the creation of a world government, but I don't think Hume would accept such a view. If such a nuclear war did actually take place, then perhaps the survivors might feel a need to take radical action with regard to political institutions, but it is human nature to put up a stop sign at a dangerous intersection only after a serious accident or two, or more popularly, to lock the barn door only after the horse is gone.
5. I am grateful to G. William Linden for urging me to consider this possibility in the context of this paper.