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A Hobbist Tory: Johnson on Hume

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My concern in this paper is both modest and limited. It is simply to draw the attention of Hume scholars to a largely neglected but nevertheless very interesting remark which Samuel Johnson passed about the Hobbist nature of Hume's political outlook. Furthermore, as I will show, Johnson's remark may also be interpreted as touching on matters of deeper and wider significance for an understanding of Hume's philosophy.

The antagonistic relationship between Hume and Johnson is well documented. The principal source of Johnson's hostility towards Hume was his disapproval of Hume's sceptical attitude to the Christian religion. That is, Johnson could not tolerate a man who had "so little scrupulosity as to venture to oppose those principles which have been thought necessary to human happiness."¹ Similarly, Hume can hardly have found the dogmatic Christianity of the "Great Moralist" any more to his taste. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Boswell reports that Hume often spoke of Johnson "in a very illiberal manner."² The attitudes and opinions which these prominent figures of the eighteenth century entertained about one another are clearly of intrinsic interest. More importantly, however, their views in this regard shed considerable light on their overall historical context and reveal something of the character of their own ideas and ideology. Accordingly, evidence of this nature should not be lightly dismissed.

One of Johnson's most famous remarks concerning Hume was that "he was a Tory by chance." This remark is standardly cited by commentators on Hume's political philosophy as well as by others. References to Johnson's remark appear, for example, in recent work by David Miller, Fredrick Whelan, and Brian Barry.³ None of these writers, however, refer to the work in which James Boswell gives us the full quotation in its original context. This, as I will show, is a point of some significance.

There are at least three possible sources for Johnson's remark on Hume: (1) The source most familiar to Hume scholars is Boswell's "Interview with David Hume," as reprinted in Norman Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues*. Johnson's remark appears in the following context:

I some how or other brought Dr. Johnson's name into our conversation. I had often heard him speak of that great Man

in a very illiberal manner. He said upon this occasion, "Johnson should be pleased with my *History*," Nettled by Hume's frequent attacks upon my revered friend in former conversations, I told him now that Dr. Johnson did not allow him much credit; for he said, "Sir, the fellow is a Tory by chance." I am sorry that I mentioned this at such a time. I was off my guard. (D 78)

(2) Another important source for this remark is Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. The remark appears, in this context, as an isolated comment. "He would not allow Mr. David Hume any credit for his political principles, though similar to his own; saying of him, 'Sir, he was a Tory by chance'."⁴ The notes in the standard scholarly edition of Boswell's *Life* indicate that Johnson's remarks on this occasion are recorded in more detail in Boswell's *Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides*.⁵

(3) In 1773 Boswell and Johnson went on a tour of the Scottish Hebrides. Johnson published his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* the following year. It was not until 1785 that Boswell published his *Journal of a Tour*. On the 30th of September he records the following conversation with Johnson:

I asked him if it was not strange that governments should permit so many infidel writings to pass without censure. — **Johnson**. 'Sir, it is might foolish. It is for want of knowing their own power ...' I observed that Mr. Hume, some of whose writings were very unfavourable to religion, was, however, a Tory. — **Johnson**. 'Sir, Hume is a Tory by chance, as being a Scotchman; but not upon a principle of duty; for he has no principle. **If he is any thing, he is a Hobbist**.' (my emphasis)

Clearly, then, Boswell gives us, in this work, not only the original context of Johnson's remark, but more importantly, a full quotation of what he actually said. What is particularly surprising is that commentators have failed to take note of Johnson's suggestion that Hume was a Hobbist — a remark that on the face of it is much more interesting than his quip about Hume being a Tory by chance.

Why have commentators failed to take note of this further claim? There seem to be two possible explanations. The most likely explanation is that they are simply unaware of Johnson's remarks as recorded in Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*. If their sources have been either Boswell's "Interview" or the text of his *Life* then Johnson's more extended remarks concerning Hume's Hobbism are not recorded. It is also quite possible that commentators have simply taken Johnson's remarks from secondary sources which make no reference to the full,

original quotation. The alternative explanation is that commentators are aware of Johnson's remark concerning Hume's Hobbism but, for some reason, deem it uninteresting. I think that this explanation is doubly implausible. First, it seems evident that the full quotation is of interest in its own right, as it gives us further insight into Johnson's general attitude to Hume. Second, and more importantly, several of the commentators who have referred to the "Tory by chance" quip, but fail to refer to the remark concerning Hume's Hobbism, have nevertheless spent some time and space analyzing both the similarities and differences between Hume and Hobbes on the subject of political philosophy. It is hard to credit that **these** commentators should take no interest in Johnson's (further) claim that Hume embraced a Hobbist outlook.⁶

Given that Johnson's remark concerning Hume's Hobbism has generated so little attention it is worth pointing out why this remark is indeed of some significance (in case there is any doubt about this). The immediate significance of this remark is, obviously enough, that it indicates that Hume's political philosophy and ideology was regarded by a prominent contemporary as having strong affinities with the views of Hobbes. A number of interesting questions arise out of this. In what specific ways is Hume a 'Hobbist'? That is, what did Johnson have in mind when he made this claim? Related to this we may ask: what specific works of Hume's did Johnson have in mind in this context? Certainly Hume's *History of England* was widely regarded by Hume's contemporaries as displaying Tory sympathies. It is also clear that it was Hume's *History* which Boswell had in mind when he referred in Hume's presence to Johnson's remark that Hume was a Tory by chance. Nevertheless, it is far from obvious that Johnson was thinking exclusively, or even primarily, of Hume's *History* when he referred to Hume's Hobbism. There are many themes and features in Hume's philosophical writings on politics — particularly in the *Treatise* — which could be described as 'Hobbist' in nature. In this way, Johnson's remark would seem to be a comment on Hume's political philosophy in general and not just on his 'Tory' *History*.

It may also be argued that Johnson's remark concerning Hume's Hobbism admits of a stronger interpretation, the significance of which extends beyond Hume's politics. That is, when we consider Johnson's remarks as they are presented by Boswell in *Journal of a Tour* it would appear that Johnson may have had Hume's "unfavourable" views on religion in mind as well as his (lack of) political principles when he described Hume as a Hobbist. Indeed, it is arguable that for Johnson there was a close connection between Hume's anti-Christian views and his 'Hobbist' politics. This interpretation of Johnson's comment touches on issues of fundamental importance for an understanding of Hume's

philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that Hume's project in the *Treatise* was essentially 'Hobbist' in nature.⁷ More specifically, it was, on this account, Hume's intention to refute the claims of Christian metaphysics and ethics and to construct a secular moral and political outlook modelled after that of Hobbes. In this respect Hume's fundamental intentions in the *Treatise* were primarily 'atheistic' or anti-Christian in nature. This was certainly the perspective which a great many of Hume's contemporaries had on the *Treatise*. In this way, suffice it to note that Johnson was not alone in recognizing 'Hobbist' elements in Hume's philosophy and in seeing a close link between them and Hume's 'atheistic' or anti-Christian intentions.⁸ In short, it may be argued that Johnson's remark reflects very deeply upon the general character of Hume's philosophy. If this is the case, then the significance of Johnson's remark extends well beyond the narrow sphere of Hume's politics or (supposed) Tory sympathies in his *History*. Clearly, then, on any interpretation, Johnson's remark concerning Hume's Hobbism is of some interest and requires some further consideration. It may be that Hume was "a Tory by chance" — but there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that he was not a 'Hobbist' by chance.

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1. G. B. Hill, ed., *Boswell's Life of Johnson: Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, rev. ed., ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934), 5:29.
2. "Boswell's Interview with Hume, July 7th, 1776," reprinted in *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1947), 78. Further references ("D") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
3. David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford, 1981), 191; Fredrick Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1985), 314, n. 19; Brian Barry, *Theories of Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 172. Surprisingly, Mossner makes no reference to Johnson's remark in *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed., (Oxford, 1980). J. Y. T. Grieg, however, does make a passing reference to this remark in his biography, *David Hume* (London, 1931), 404.
4. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (above, n. 1), 4:194.
5. It is important to note, however, that this reference to Boswell's *Journal of a Tour* appears only in the notes of Hill's (rather inaccessible) scholarly edition of Boswell's *Life*. (There is, for

example, no such reference in R. W. Chapman's edition of Boswell's *Life* [Oxford, 1970], 1215.)

6. This is particularly obvious in the case of Brian Barry's reference to Johnson's remarks. At the beginning of one paragraph Barry refers to Johnson's remark suggesting that Hume was a Tory by chance. The following paragraph begins with the claim that the "most plausible interpretation of Hume's conservatism might be to regard it as analogous to that of Hobbes." Given this, one would naturally assume that Barry would have referred to Johnson's remark concerning Hume's Hobbism if he had been aware of it. The fact that Barry refers to Chapman's edition of Boswell's *Life* and not to *The Journal of a Tour* clearly suggests that he is not aware of Johnson's further remarks or of their original context. (I note also that Miller and Whelan do not give any reference to Boswell's works.)
7. Paul Russell, "Hume's *Treatise* and Hobbes's *The Elements of Law*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985): 51-63; "Scepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988): 247-65. See also Paul Russell, "'Atheism' and the Title-Page of Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 14.2 (November 1988): 408-23.
8. For further details regarding the reactions to Hume's *Treatise*, see the papers cited above (n. 7). By the 1770's the battle against Hobbes's 'atheistic' philosophy was almost over, but Johnson's remark attests to its persistence. By the late eighteenth century, however, Hume had replaced Hobbes, in the eyes of the orthodox, as the leading spokesman for the cause of 'atheism'.