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John B. Stewart

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Opinion

Hume undertakes to apply the experimental method to the “mind subjects,” the subjects in which human beliefs go a long way in determining what happens. What happens in domestic and international economics, what happens in domestic and international politics, what provision is made with regard to religion, etc. is shaped to a great extent (a) by what the influential people believe is true, and (b) by what they believe is good. Let us take one of Hume’s examples. What do the influential people believe would be the most likely effect of the inculcation in the public mind of the idea that it is good to kill tyrants? To what kind of governance would such a general belief be most likely to lead? Would that kind of governance be good or bad? I used the word “opinion” in the title of my book to refer to the beliefs of a group, society, or nation, as in the expression “public opinion.” Long reminds us that in “Of the First Principles of Government” we are told that all governmental authority ultimately is based on opinion. Property, too, is based on opinion: first, the belief that it is good (useful) to follow certain rules of ownership, and second, the moral belief that it is wicked to violate those rules. Because I think that Hume was out to improve the beliefs—the opinions—of his readers, especially his British readers (those of “this nation”) about politics, economic policy, the management of religion, etc., I entitled my last chapter “Changing the British Mind.” Do Hume’s writings show that he found that the British mind needed to be changed?

Reform

My main submission is that those who call Hume a conservative attribute to him a scepticism far too extreme. They follow this up by attributing to him a view on politics consistent with extreme scepticism. Consequently, following Mill, they call him a conservative. The key question is whether they are correct on his epistemology.

I argue that, having applied the experimental method, Hume concluded that the British were wrong-headed on certain important topics. On the constitution some Britons were so intent on increasing liberty that they forgot that authority is needed, while others forgot that the purpose of authority is to promote liberty. And their wrong-headedness on trade had contributed to wars, high taxes, and a burden of debt so heavy that the future of the country was endangered. He concluded that the British mind needed to be changed. By using the experimental method he had arrived at what he held were valid generalizations about the results of certain maxims, policies, and constitutional arrangements. Such generalizations—scientific findings—are possible because persons of “solid understanding” can discover what causes (maxims, policies, etc.) will produce particular effects if all else remains constant. (See the opening paragraphs of “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” and “Of Commerce.”)

Long says that my Hume had “transformative ambitions.” Yes, I think that Hume aspired to change the British mind; that is why he undertook to show that the thinking of Britons was wrong on many topics: the balance of power, the character of the French and the Irish, the protective tariff, the matchless constitution, etc.

Why is my Hume a Fabian, as Long says? Here we must distinguish between that which theoretically is best and that which is achievable at an acceptable cost. Hume’s political science is both theoretical and practical. Politics is the art of the possible. Hume warns even those who have the right to undertake “violent” (or forced) innovation against such change. The multitude is highly conservative; unlike the sceptic they do not test old beliefs and ways by the experimental method. Remember what happened to poor Dr. Harvey: as a result of making a great discovery he lost half his medical practice! To clear out all false beliefs—built up by hasty and shallow thinking and by centuries of bad education—is not the work of an afternoon.

Long writes: “The commitment of the sceptic to the experimental method is not the commitment of an ideologue to a reforming programme.” Absolutely correct; nor is it the commitment of an ideologue to the status quo. Long’s statement that Hume continued “to defy ideological characterization” simply prompts one to ask whether he finds that, on the whole, the substance of Hume’s political and moral essays is closer to the political movement that came to be called Conservatism, or to the political movement that came to be called Liberal, or perhaps to some other political movement.

Philosophy

Long finds that I represent Hume as “something Hume himself considered a contradiction in terms—a philosopher who has embraced, if not precisely a party, then at least a programme or movement for change.” Let us be specific. When Hume advocated the reform of the British constituencies had he strayed too close to the political front for a philosopher? When he advocated a fundamental change in the House of Lords had he abdicated his standing as a philosopher? Was advocacy of freer trade bad philosophy? No, Hume did not embrace a programme or movement for change; rather, he helped originate a programme or movement for change.

Long finds that in making my case I employ three interpretative strategies. First, I relegate conservatism to the reactionary end of the spectrum. If I do so, which I doubt, I plead lack of intent. As some critics have said, I do not attempt to show that Hume is not what Livingston, Miller, Whelan, etc., call a conservative. Do I misread them, as Long implies? Or do they relegate conservatism to the reactionary end of the spectrum?

He says, second, that I provide “a strategic reading of Hume’s scepticism and of his experimental method such as to render them compatible with a fairly visionary and programmatic approach to political innovation and change.” This gets to the heart of the matter. Where is Long’s evidence?

Finally, he writes of “a strategic conceptualization of ‘liberalism’.” But in my Introduction (6) I say that I am using the term roughly as it was used at a particular time, at the time when it came to have a public meaning in political discourse in Great Britain. I hope my political history isn’t too faulty. I still think that definition appropriate when attempting to show that Hume’s views would not have put him in the other main camp of that period, the conservative camp.

No, I would not try to present Hume as a liberal democrat. Consistent with the tradition which historians such as Halévy, Ruggiero, and Jennings called “liberalism,” Hume believed in the need for a carefully contrived constitution to prevent knavery (selfishness)—including the knavery of the people as well as the knavery of kings and grandees—from using public authority for its own purposes.