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Book Reviews

Neil McArthur. *David Hume's Political Theory: Law, Commerce, and the Constitution of Government*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 193. ISBN 9780802093356, cloth, $45.00.

Neil McArthur chose with care the title of his fine book. This is not a study of the more purely philosophical aspects of Hume's treatment of politics. That is, it does not concern itself with Hume's assault on the leading "speculative" political principles of his day, the social contract and the divine right theories of the basis of the duty of allegiance. McArthur forsakes this very well-trodden ground in favour of a careful and thorough account of Hume's contribution to what, so he says, is now called political science. "This," McArthur says, "is the tradition concerned with concrete questions about the machinery and functioning of government rather than abstract ones about its nature and foundation" (14). The object of study for this tradition is actual political practice, past and present, and the goal is to draw conclusions about what makes particular forms of government, in particular historical circumstances, prosper and decline. To treat Hume's political writings in such a fashion is to relate him to Machiavelli and Harrington, not Hobbes and Locke, and to see his most important contemporaries as Montesquieu, Turgot, and Condorcet. McArthur says little, however, about either Hume's debts to his forebears in the tradition or the differences between Hume and other political writers of his own day. For the most part McArthur concentrates on providing a clear and

succinct survey of those of Hume's texts which bear on the question of what kind of government is best suited to solve the (as Hume saw the matter) wholly new problems presented to legislative and executive power by the rise of international commerce. McArthur is to be congratulated for acknowledging the centrality of this question to Hume's intellectual biography. He is also to be congratulated for recognising that just as important as the essays among the texts in which Hume poses and answers the question is the entirety of *The History of England*. He does not press the point, but, still, McArthur provides further reasons to see the *History* not as an exercise in *belles lettres* that Hume turned to once his most important work was done, but, instead, as the culmination and crowning glory of Hume's career as a philosophical analyst of the age in which he lived.

As McArthur reads him, Hume's guiding concern in his political writings is with *civilisation*, and with how to preserve it and prevent outbreaks of its contrary, *barbarism*. The marks of a civilised society are humanity (or general benevolence), knowledge, and industry. Hume made two important contributions to the study of how civilisation is to be fostered and maintained. The first concerns the relation between civilisation and avarice, the ineliminable human desire for what the eighteenth century termed "luxury." Like Mandeville before him, Hume saw that avarice could be harnessed so as to serve the ends of the state, and that, contrary to what had been argued by every moralist since the success of Sparta began to be contrasted with the decline and fall of Rome, prosperity and freedom from external interference were not threatened by the pursuit of luxury. Both Spartan achievement and Roman failure, so Hume argued, were to be explained in terms which had nothing to do with the martial virtue of the former and the increasing "effeminacy" of the latter. Where Hume differed from Mandeville was in showing that it was not true that a state's success had to be achieved at the expense of the virtue of its citizens. Commercial success could be seen as a progenitor, not an enemy, of humanity. Nevertheless, wealth and military strength were not sufficient for civilisation. Just as important was a further kind of freedom, a citizen's freedom from interference at the hands of both his fellow citizens and those in positions of power. This kind of freedom was generally understood to be secured by, as the slogan went, "the government of laws, not men." Hume's second innovation was to argue that the government of laws did not require the establishment of a republic. Civilisation depended on government, of course, but the crucial issue was the *form* of the laws that defined a state's constitution, and upon the manner in which those laws were implemented and enforced by the judiciary and magistracy. Once the right sort of laws had been established, with the right mechanisms of implementation and enforcement, it no longer mattered whether the state was a republic rather than, say, a monarchy. To understand Hume in this way is, as McArthur observes, to see his legal theory as an integral part of his

political theory. The heart of McArthur's book is the spelling out of the detail of Hume's reappraisal of luxury and of his conception of law as a embodying a set of general principles upon which civilisation as such is founded.

McArthur concludes his book with a chapter meant to scotch once and for all the idea that Hume is the kind of conservative who refuses all possibility of evaluating a society by appeal to standards of liberty and fairness that transcend the customs and traditions of that society. Not only is it not the case that Hume's epistemological skepticism gets in the way of such critique; it is also not the case that Hume's understanding of liberty is such that freedom can only be defined in terms of the particular conventions and practises of particular societies. With Donald Livingston in his sights, McArthur argues that according to Hume, "The right to private liberty [i.e., the liberty that comes from the security of property and person] is . . . natural, universal, and inalienable—we are born with it, we all possess it, and we do not and cannot give it up" (133). This gives Hume a standard against which to measure particular societies and find them wanting. But though in this sense a "universalist" and not a "particularist," Hume is yet a conservative, since he is not prepared to countenance any and all measures that might be taken to increase the amount of liberty in a given society. In general, it is likely that the costs, in the form of disruption and disorder, will outweigh the benefits of any attempt to institute radical reform. McArthur calls Hume a "precautionary conservative." Caution will, or at least should, very often silence the voice of principled opposition. Even so, according to McArthur, Hume is to be regarded as an optimist, one who has "a strong positive vision for the future of society" (138), and who is rightly regarded as of the party of Beccaria and Bentham, not of Burke. Indeed, he is to be seen as "one of the philosophical architects of the modern liberal state" (141).

I am not sure that McArthur is entitled to a conclusion as strong and unequivocal as this. I think that Hume was much more concerned with the past and the (mid-eighteenth-century) present than he was with the future. That is, I think that Hume's primary concern in all of his political writings was with the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 and with the constitutional adjustments that ensued. His intention, first in the essays and then, fully, in the *History*, was to explain what had happened, and in the process to make it plain to his contemporaries that British politics had now changed completely, so completely that the issues that caused chaos and bloodshed in the previous century could at last be left behind. McArthur is surely absolutely right to identify as one of Hume's great discoveries the principle that freedom for Britons did not depend on who is at the helm of the ship of state. What mattered, rather, was how laws are drafted, the quality of the magistracy, and the proper regulation of the economy. His major contribution was, indeed, to show that Montesquieu had been wrong to be as worried as he was about the fragility of

the British political order, and to identify the manifold ways in which the balance of power between legislature and executive guaranteed the preservation of liberty, peace, and prosperity. But I am not convinced that there is a message here for any other time or place than Britain, North and South, in the middle of the eighteenth century. Perhaps this is simply to say, as has of course been said before, that using the terms "conservative" and "liberal" in the context of periods prior to the French Revolution is a difficult and not obviously fruitful business.

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