David Hume Esq.

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Hume's Skeptical Politics

MIRIAM SCHLEIFER MCCORMICK

Abstract: I argue that there is a unity between Hume's philosophical reflection and his political views and that many interesting connections can be found that illuminate both aspects of his thought. This paper highlights two of these connections. First, I argue that the conclusions Hume comes to in his political writings are natural outgrowths of his skepticism, a skepticism that recommends limitation of inquiry, modesty, moderation and openness. Most scholars who view Hume's skepticism as informing his political views see it as supporting a conservative politics, one which is concerned above all to preserve the status quo. I reject the idea that the kind of philosophical skepticism embraced by Hume leads to such conservatism. The second main aspect of the unity of Hume's thought I discuss concerns that way in which he addresses normative questions in the epistemological and political realms. The question of what resources Hume has to evaluate some beliefs or philosophical systems as better than others, given his skeptical conclusions, is one that has been of central concern for Hume scholars. His evaluations of political systems and governments can be understood in a similar way; the principles we use to evaluate personal beliefs can also be applied in the evaluation of political systems.

Most twentieth-century discussions of Hume's politics echo the view expressed by T. H. Grose in his 1889 introduction to Hume's works where he says that Hume's philosophical labors came to an end when he started writing essays and history.[1] In his foreword to the revised edition of Hume's *Essays*, Eugene Miller voices his

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disagreement with this view, saying, "Hume's essays do not mark an abandonment of philosophy . . . but rather an attempt to improve it by having it address the concerns of common life" (*Essays*, xviii).[2]

It is hard to know where the contemporary consensus lies on this issue because very few scholars consider what connections might exist between Hume's more strictly philosophical work and his political writings. This is particularly true of the scholarship of the last twenty years. Two twentieth-century scholars who explicitly argue that the two aspects of Hume's work form a unity are David Miller and Frederick Whelan. Miller says that Hume's philosophy and politics form "a coherent whole,"[3] and in the introduction to his book, Whelan states, "My aim in this study is to achieve an integrated view of Hume's philosophy of human nature and its political manifestations, calling attention to the way in which his political philosophy follows from and is firmly grounded in his general conception of mind."[4]

In more recent discussions, one rarely finds explicit espousals of the view that Hume's political writings and history are discontinuous with his "philosophy," but there is still a dearth of explicit discussions of the ways in which they are connected. This tendency seems to be shifting, and we can find hints in some recent scholarship that Hume's works are being treated more as a unified whole. For example, Richard Dees says that the task of demonstrating how to be an "impartial patriot" is "the implicit work of both Hume's philosophical and his historical writings," suggesting that he sees all aspects of Hume's thoughts as importantly connected. He does not, however, delve into or expand on these connections.[5] Neil McArthur argues that Hume's political theory is unified and continuous with his philosophy as a whole, but he finds the connection between Hume's political ideas and his skeptical epistemology problematic. He takes the fact that Hume never explicitly says that his epistemological skepticism can be applied to politics to be a fairly decisive blow against those who would attempt such an application.[6] I take it that McArthur's wariness of making this link stems from the worry that doing so would lead to saddling Hume with the kind of conservative politics that McArthur does not think he embraces. While my view is largely supportive of McArthur's overall interpretation, I will argue that it is helpful and illuminating to think of Hume's politics as connected to his philosophical skepticism.

There is a unity between Hume's philosophical reflection and his political views, and many interesting connections can be found that will illuminate both aspects of his thought. In this paper, I highlight two of these connections. First, I argue that the conclusions Hume reaches in his political writings are natural outgrowths of his skepticism—a skepticism that recommends limitation of inquiry, modesty, moderation, and openness. The second main aspect of the unity of Hume's thought that I discuss concerns the way in which Hume addresses normative questions in the epistemological and political realms. The question of what resources Hume has to evaluate some beliefs or philosophical systems as better than others is one that has been of central concern for Hume scholars. Hume's evaluations of political systems or governments raise similar questions that can be answered in a similar way: the principles we use to evaluate personal actions and beliefs can also be applied in the evaluation of political systems.

I begin by briefly stating some of the central features of Hume's skepticism then turn to the negative task of showing that Hume does not embrace political views that are inconsistent with his skepticism. First, I argue that any affinity Hume has for the views of a particular party does not commit him to any *a priori* metaphysical principle. I then discuss his problematic "Perfect Commonwealth" essay and argue that his methodology in this essay is simply a part of his "science of man," a science he clearly saw as compatible with his skepticism.

Having shown that Hume does not embrace views that are clearly inconsistent with his skepticism, in section 2 I explain how some of his central views about politics and government are importantly connected to his skepticism. First, Hume's view about the legitimacy of government and the nature of political obligation distinguish him from non-skeptical political philosophers. Second, Hume's view of factions reveals a clear application of his skeptical principles. Third, Hume's stance on the American issue can be better understood if we remember that he is a skeptic. Once it is clear what I mean by calling Hume's politics "skeptical," it may seem that this is the same as what some commentators have called "contextualist."

In my third, and final, section, I argue that the kind of skeptical politics I ascribe to Hume is not purely contextual or pragmatic, because a skeptic can make reliable generalizations and evaluations about political systems that go beyond specific contexts. To explain how this is possible, it is useful to think about how a skeptic can make such evaluations at the level of individual beliefs and actions. The same resources are available for both kinds of evaluations.

1. Possible Skeptical Violations

Despite disagreement concerning the nature, scope, and depth of his skepticism, the fact that Hume viewed himself as a skeptic and recommended adopting a skeptical approach cannot be denied. In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the only philosophy Hume praises is "the Academic or Sceptical Philosophy," and his reason is that it is the only philosophy that does not cater to our arrogance or superstitions (EHU 12.1–16; SBN 149–155).[7] In the abstract of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume says, "The philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical" (T Abstract 27; SBN 657),[8] and in the *Treatise* itself he writes that "if we are philosophers it ought only to be upon sceptical principles" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270). But what does it mean to be a philosopher "upon sceptical principles"—to be a skeptical philosopher? Can one even do philosophy and be a skeptic? The answer is yes, but it will be a different kind of philosophy than what is often practiced.

At the end of *Treatise* 1.4.7, "Conclusion of this book," Hume characterizes the aims of his philosophical inquiry, saying that he has a curiosity to "be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). The rest of the *Treatise* as well as the bulk of writings that come after it investigate these ideas. Hume sees that the learned world is in "deplorable ignorance" concerning the nature of our moral, aesthetic, and intellectual judgments, and he thinks that his investigation into the passions and inclinations that govern human beings can contribute to the "instruction of mankind" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). He hopes to replace the tenuous, though "specious and agreeable" views that philosophers embrace with "a system or set of opinions, which . . . might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272). He knows that such a system will be limited in what it can accomplish, but he still hopes to increase our understanding of human experience by offering more careful explanations than have previously been given.

We can see, then, that Hume's more general philosophical aims do not conflict with the skeptical conclusions of Book One of the *Treatise*. These conclusions tell us that our most basic beliefs are grounded in principles that lack rational foundation and that abstract reasoning can lead us to the brink of total skepticism. These skeptical conclusions would be inconsistent with Hume's project if his aims included searching for final answers that would put an end to inquiry about certain matters. But his more modest aim remains consistent with his skepticism. He only wishes to show the defects of other systems and offer alternatives that are not open to the same criticisms.

The modesty of Hume's aims extends further to the subject matter of his inquiries. One aim is, thus, to delineate "more distinctly those subjects, where alone [philosophers] can expect assurance and conviction," and to bring the study of human nature "a little more into fashion" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273). As a *consequence* of recognizing our limitations, we limit our inquiries to phenomena of the human world. In the first *Enquiry*, Hume says that one "natural result" of skeptical doubts that can be of "benefit to mankind" is the limitation of the subject matter of philosophical inquiry (EHU 12.2; SBN 162). Such statements make it clear that Hume's judgments about the kind of philosophy that is valuable are influenced by his skepticism.

This skeptical modesty is not simply a kind of fallibilism, that is, recognition that one can never be absolutely certain of the truth of one's conclusions. Hume is clear that accepting skeptical principles will limit inquiry. Thus, a skeptic's philosophical *aims*, not simply his attitude towards the results, will differ from those of a non-skeptic. A skeptic can still engage in constructive philosophy, but he will proceed with care and caution and will not work out a system based on *a priori* principles and then assume that the world *must* correspond to them. The skeptic will not decide in advance what a proper answer must look like. His curiosity will lead him to search for illumination, and he will be successful whenever he comes to understand something that he did not understand before.[9]

The aim of this paper is to argue that Hume's politics are influenced by his skepticism in a way that parallels the influence of his skepticism on his more strictly philosophical theorizing. He adopts political views and comes to conclusions about the merits or demerits of political systems, but these conclusions are always tentative and revisable. He is critical of those who justify political claims based on abstract, *a priori* principles and who refuse to attend to actual practices. Hume, instead, attempts always to draw his principles from common life and practice, whether these principles are epistemological, moral, or political.

To make the case that there is an important connection between Hume's skepticism and his politics, I first need to show that his skepticism is *consistent* with his politics. If Hume's political thinking reveals a commitment to any kind of abstract, absolute metaphysical principle, then it would be inconsistent with his skepticism. I will consider two possible instances of such inconsistency. First, if Hume embraces any of the speculative principles that seem to be foundational to either Whig or Tory, his politics would be non-skeptical. Second, Hume seems to most obviously diverge from a largely contextual, practical approach to political issues in his "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." If he there invokes principles that cannot be gleaned from observation of systems past and present, then this speculation would violate his skeptical principles, for Hume is critical of those whose plans of government are "plainly imaginary," and he recognizes that such theorizing tends to be "useless and chimerical" (*Essays*, 514).

When wondering why skeptical philosophy is the subject of "so much groundless reproach and obloquy," Hume says, "By flattering no irregular passion, it gains few partisans. By opposing so many vices and follies, it raises to itself an abundance of enemies" (EHU 5.1; SBN 41). It may, thus, be difficult to provide a skeptic's politics with a useful label. Just as the skeptic opposes vice and follies in philosophy, so would he in politics. Humean skepticism would oppose whoever claims complete knowledge, whoever declares inquiry closed or forbids open discussion and freedom of thought. Given that the skeptic shuns dogma, it is unlikely that he would attach himself to a particular movement or party. It seems that on any particular question the skeptic would try his best to come to as clear and unprejudiced a view as possible and would, in consequence, agree with some parties on some questions and with other parties on other questions. In his discussion of Jefferson and Hume's differing views on history, Craig Walton emphasizes that Hume's *History* is filled with warnings of the dangers of extremes and of being too attached to one's political views.[10] Hume says, for example, "extremes of all kinds are to be avoided; and though no one will please either faction by moderate opinions, it is there we are most likely to meet with truth and certainty" (cited in Walton, "Hume and Jefferson," 397).[11]

One sees Hume attempting this balance and resisting party attachment in many of the letters that discuss his *History*. Hume repeatedly mentions how he is striving for impartiality, trying to free himself of Whiggish tendencies, and claims that he is quite happy that he has been called both Whig and Tory. For example, he says to William Mure of Caldwell, "The first Quality of an Historian is to be true & impartial; the next to be interesting" (*Letters*, 1:210),[12] to the Comtess de Bouffler, "perhaps, your esteem for the entire impartiality which I aim at, and which, to tell the truth, is so unusual in English historians, has made your Ladyship overlook many defects, into which the want of art or genius has betrayed me" (*Letters*, 1:344), and to Mathew Sharp "I have finished the reigns of James and Charles, and will soon send them to the press. I have the impudence to pretend that I am of no party, and have no bias. Lord Elibank says that I am a moderate Whig, and Mr Wallace that I am a candid Tory" (*Letters*, 1:185). In a letter to Gilbert Elliot he writes,

> In this new Edition I have corrected several Mistakes and Oversights, which had chiefly proceeded from the plaguy Prejudices of Whiggism, with which I was too much infected when I began this Work. . . . But if you now do me the Honour to give this part of my Work a second Perusal, I am perswaded that you will no longer throw upon me this reproachful Epithet, and will acquit me of all Propensity to Whiggism. (*Letters*, 1:379)

And finally to John Clephane he says, "With regard to politics and the character of princes and great men, I think I am very moderate. My views of things are more conformable to Whig principles; my representations of persons to Tory prejudices. Nothing can so much prove that men commonly regard more persons than things, as to find that I am commonly numbered among the Tories" (*Letters*, 1:237).

Whether he ultimately succeeds or not, it is clear that Hume thought it important to be free of partisan attachment. James Moore begins a discussion of Hume's "political science" by referring to "his criticisms of the speculative principles of the Whig and the Tory parties."[13] In surveying Hume's views on the events of the seventeenth century, David Miller shows how Hume at times lines up with traditional Whig views and at times took the traditional Tory line. Duncan Forbes also points out how difficult it is to fit Hume into any party or political direction. He first considers the evidence of his letters with all the professions of avoiding party dogma. He points out that "the freedom from all political dependence and connexion on which Hume prided himself and made into a way of life for a man of letters, was itself an important political attitude in eighteenth-century England, and was often called 'Tory.'"[14] But Forbes then goes on to show that Hume's letters clearly show sympathy for both Whig and Tory causes and that his friends belong to both parties. When more directly considering Hume's actual published writings, Forbes says one is "well-nigh confounded by a dazzling mosaic of the most baffling complexity," where again it does not seem possible to show that his views are "characteristic of a particular 'ideology'" (Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, 135).

In the end, Forbes does attach a label to Hume's politics; he calls it "scientific, or sceptical whiggism," which he contrasts with "vulgar whiggism." Vulgar Whiggism is decidedly non-skeptical, as it holds on to certain beliefs in an unquestioning, knee-jerk, dogmatic way. These beliefs include the belief in the ultimate superiority of the English constitution, seeing it as achieving the "correct balance recognized as the ideal and mark of durable government by the classical theorists," the belief that the subjects in an absolute monarchy are "slaves," and the belief "that the difference between free and absolute government was not one of degree, but of kind" (Forbes, 142–43).[15] Forbes points out that Hume detested the "anti-French chauvinism" which one finds in this vulgar Whiggism and "which it was his aim, *qua* philosopher, to correct," concluding, "this can be regarded as part of his programme of promoting political moderation" (Forbes, 150).

I understand and agree with the skeptical part of the label Forbes provides; it points to an abhorrence of incontrovertible claims and absolute principles. But why does Forbes call Hume's position Whiggism at all? He never directly addresses this, but I think it is because Hume agrees with some of the central Whig ideas, particularly that the British constitution is "singular" and that its singularity consists in its offering the most entire and perfect system of liberty ever seen and entailing a more absolute rule of law than any type of government. Hume clearly sides with the Whiggish take on the seventeenth century. He regarded the 1688 revolution as a very good thing, because he thought it was necessary that royal prerogative be formally limited and had no misgivings about the correctness of doing so, since Hume saw royal authority as a human artifact with nothing divine about it. Given Forbes's wariness of a non-historical approach to Hume's politics and his interest in connecting Hume's approach to the approaches of his contemporaries, Hume's view of royal authority may have been sufficient for Forbes to group him with the Whigs. But Forbes goes too far, for although Hume sees liberty as essential to a civil society, he also sees that too much liberty can be dangerous, putting at risk the ends for which we cherish it. As Dees points out, although liberty is not essential for political legitimacy, "it is a public good worth fostering and protecting." However, one cannot have liberty without the security that authority provides.[16]

In a discussion of Hume's thoughts on the politics of his time, J. G. A. Pocock emphasizes the ambiguity and ambivalence in Hume's views. He notes that Hume could not go along with the establishment, which favored landed property and shunned the new commerce founded on mobile property as corrupting virtue.[17] Instead, Hume recognized that virtue and commerce *were* in conflict but believed that commerce allowed for culture and refinement. "Hume was no ideologue," says Pocock, summing up Hume's position thus: "The World of the Imagination would continue to require the discipline of classical criticism; the civilized monarchy—the form of government best suited to a polished and commercial nation—would continue to require the discipline of republican freedom . . . . Hume held that authority and liberty could never be reconciled and that neither could replace the other" (Pocock, "Hume and the American Revolution," 335–36). According to Pocock, Hume held that there is no ideal balance to obtain and no side that could win. Instead, one should seek political arrangements that allowed for the most peace, liberty, and culture—recognizing the tension that exists among these goods.

When Hume's philosophical skepticism is seen as linked to his politics, the link is almost always spelled out as supporting a conservative politics.[18] But it seems that in any issue of the time, one finds Hume's view to be a mixture that accepts some and rejects other aspects of the reigning dogmas. Political labels do not suffice to describe his view; instead, we need to hear the details of his position on any particular issue.[19] This is exactly what we should expect from a Humean skeptic, since for Hume, one of the benefits of being exposed to skeptical arguments is that it will allow one to attend to both sides of an argument.

Just as Hume thinks the way to find general principles of human nature is through a cautious observation of human life, he thinks a similar approach can help to formulate general principles about political systems. In his essay "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," Hume tries to show that from a perusal of different systems, both current and in history, one can draw reliable, general conclusions about what contributes to political health: "So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they 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" (*Essays*, 16). This language is reminiscent of the beginning of the *Treatise*. The aim of his "science of man" is to explain the principles of human nature, which Hume thinks is best done through experience and observation. He hopes that such an application of the experimental method to human nature will allow us to explain much of human behavior, thought, and practices.

Many of the points Hume makes in the introduction to the *Treatise* are methodological. He contrasts the scientific approach, that of cautious observation and experimentation, with the approach of those who fall into the error of "imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles" (T Intro 9; SBN xviii). The first approach is consistent with and informed by Hume's skepticism, the second approach is not. The approach Hume outlines in "That

Politics May Be Reduced to a Science" seems to be an extension of this cautious and modest investigation.[20] However, one may wonder when reading Hume's essay "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" whether he is engaging in immodest and unskeptical speculation.

Hume's criticisms of Harrington's *Oceana* seem to be pointing to Harrington's failures of observation—namely, that he overlooks the fact that human nature would not tolerate forced equality. Yet Hume begins his own theorizing without any general observations concerning the nature and results of different kinds of political systems. It may seem, then, that he is guilty of the same kind of fanciful conjecture that he attributes to More and Plato. However, when commenting on the virtues of his perfect commonwealth, Hume does appeal to numerous observations of different political systems, both historical and in other countries. Still, it may seem as if such observations lead him to speculate in a way that is not becoming of limited, modest, skeptic.

Hume's response to such an objection would be, I think, that these are not idle, ungrounded conjectures. First, to outline an ideal commonwealth is not merely idle speculation. One can see this ideal commonwealth as embodying all the political virtues in much the way Hume's imaginary Cleanthes in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* embodies all the human virtues. Cleanthes is not only the perfect son-in-law but "a philosopher might select this character as a model of perfect virtue" (EPM 9.2; SBN 270).[21] When thinking about Cleanthes, we can imagine what it would be like to be *more* like him, even if we can never fully realize this ideal. Similarly, even if Hume's perfect commonwealth never comes about, by reflecting on its principles we can learn about and even improve our current constitution, using it as guide so that "we may be able to bring any real constitution or form of government as near it as possible, by such gentle alterations and innovations as may not give too great disturbance to society" (*Essays*, 513–14). The postulation of an ideal of this sort raises questions that go beyond the scope of this paper and that others have answered in various ways.[22]

Hume's statement that no one could doubt "that the foregoing plan of government is practicable" (*Essays*, 526) reinforces the view that there is nothing in his ideal that contradicts any principle of human nature. Moore argues that part of Hume's point in this essay is that one should not think of an ideal government in the abstract, "isolated from the behavior of men in society." He adds, "They should attempt instead to discover a form of constitutional government which would reflect more accurately the conditions of social life as they presented themselves in the societies of the eighteenth century" (Moore, "Hume's Political Science," 834). Hume's "Perfect Commonwealth" can be seen as such an attempt. Hume thinks that a large republic, something that was not thought possible, would solve a number of concrete problems. But he is clear that the main purpose of describing this system is not to put it into practice but, rather, for us to have a better understanding of the kinds of principles we ought to employ in trying to, for example, balance liberty and authority. For our purposes, however, it is important to remember the nature of these principles; they are not *a priori* or absolute. Rather, they are general rules akin to the rules of good reasoning. We lack rational foundations for the principles that regulate belief, but we find following such rules is conducive to our personal and collective well-being. Likewise, we lack ultimate (transcendent) explanations for why stable and refined societies are better than unstable or barbarous ones. Still, he can explain why he prefers civilized, industrious societies, namely, because these seem to allow for stability, peace, and liberty, which harmonize with our basic needs and are also pleasing to our moral sentiments by being both useful and agreeable. None of these preferences require embracing any abstract, metaphysical principle of the kind that is inconsistent with skepticism.

2. Examples of Skepticism in Hume's Politics

One of Hume's main skeptical warnings is to beware of false philosophy. He ends the first book of the *Treatise* by contrasting his philosophical project with projects where hypotheses are "embrac'd merely for being specious and agreeable," a practice that does not allow for "any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272–73). In the first section of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume says, "We must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate" (EHU 1.12; SBN 12). The "false and adulterate" kind occurs when either human vanity takes over, and one tries to "penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding," or when one's motive for philosophizing is to defend popular superstition. Politics based on abstract philosophical views is a pernicious result of not heeding this warning.

In his essay "Of the Original Contract," Hume provides an example of a philosophical construction used to justify a political position. The idea that society is based on a promise, either explicit or tacit, flies in the face of experience and history. Hume begins his description of those who espouse this theory by characterizing them as philosophers "who have embraced a party,"[23] thereby claiming that they are justifying party principle by appealing to a philosophical theory. He says:

> They assert not only government in its earliest infancy arose from consent . . . but also that, even at present . . . it rests on no other foundation. They affirm, that all men are still born equal, and owe allegiance to no prince or government, unless bound by the obligation and sanction of a promise. And . . . this promise is always understood to be conditional, and imposes on him no obligation, unless he meet with justice and protection from

> his sovereign. These advantages the sovereign promises him in return; and if he fail in the execution, he . . . has thereby freed his subject from all obligations to allegiance. Such, according to these philosophers, is the foundation of authority in every government, and such the right of resistance possessed by every subject. (*Essays*, 469)

But, says Hume, if these reasoners would "look abroad into the world," they would meet with nothing that "can warrant so refined and philosophical a system" (*Essays*, 469–70).

Hume ends this essay by saying that if a philosophical theory pertaining to morals or politics "leads to paradoxes, repugnant to the common sentiments of mankind," then nothing is clearer proof of its being erroneous (*Essays*, 486). Those who advocate this theory do so, Hume thinks, to show "that absolute monarchy is inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all; and that the supreme power in a state cannot take from any man, by taxes and impositions, any part of his property, without his own consent or that of his representatives" (*Essays*, 487). In both this essay and others, Hume himself argues for similar ideas; absolute monarchy is not his preferred type of government, nor does he deny the legitimacy of resistance or the importance of stable property. But the method of argument that appeals to philosophical fictions, instead of to the complexities and intricacies of history, is dangerous. It can too easily justify rebellion, for one can often claim that the sovereign is failing to keep up his side of the contract.

When discussing the same topic in the *Treatise*, Hume is even more explicit about the contrast between his approach and the approach of philosophers who argue that justified allegiance depends on consent. He says, "were you to ask the far greatest part of the nation, whether they had consented to the authority of their rulers, or promis'd to obey them, they wou'd be inclin'd to think very strangely of you; and would certainly reply, that the affair depended not on their consent, but that they were born to such obedience." That people find themselves obliged to obey despite having not given any consent, Hume thinks is "a clear proof" that allegiance is not derived from consent or promise. This "subtile invention" of "these philosophers" is thus "not a true one" (T 3.2.8.9; SBN 548).

Hume goes on to make it clear that the principle these "political writers" intended to establish by inventing the idea of a promise or original contract is "perfectly just and reasonable." His problem is that "the reasoning, upon which they endeavor'd to establish it is fallacious and sophistical" (T 3.2.9.1; SBN 549). The principle that he finds just and reasonable is that "government admits of exceptions, and that egregious tyranny in the rulers is sufficient to free the subjects from all ties of allegiance" (T 3.2.9.1; SBN 549). This point is so important to Hume that he repeats it, saying, "This conclusion is just, tho' the principles be erroneous, and I flatter myself that I can establish the same conclusion on more reasonable principles" (T 3.2.9.2; SBN 550). If we can understand the nature of these reasonable principles and how they differ form the erroneous, fallacious, sophistical ones, we will have a better understanding of how a skeptical political philosophy differs from a non-skeptical kind.

According to Hume, the source of our allegiance to authority is "interest." We give up our liberty to authority because of the security it provides us. When a government becomes oppressive and tyrannical, we no longer enjoy this security. Government is supposed to protect us from the unpredictable and potentially harmful passions of our fellow humans. But government is also made up of human beings with the same potential for pernicious sentiments. When such sentiments take over those governing, government is no longer serving the interest which was the cause of our obedience: "As interest, therefore, is the immediate sanction of government, the one can have no longer being than the other; and whenever the civil magistrate carries his oppression so far as to render his authority perfectly intolerable, we are no longer bound to submit to it. The cause ceases; the effect must cease also" (T 3.2.9.2; SBN 551).

This principle does not tell us, in the abstract, that one form of government is better than another. A democracy can become tyrannical, and an absolute monarchy can remain legitimate if it provides the kind of security we expect. It is not, as it seems Locke holds, that legitimacy correlates with degree of consent. It is only by looking carefully at a particular context that we can decide if a government has abused its power to a point that resistance or rebellion is no longer a crime. Hume is careful to point out that the "the common rule requires submission; and 'tis only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place" (T 3.2.10.1; SBN 554).

For Locke the conditions for justified resistance can be articulated without appeal to specific facts or contexts. Given that there are certain natural laws discovered through reason that reveal certain natural rights possessed by rational creatures, any government that violates such laws and such rights is not legitimate. And rational beings can only truly consent to government if it respects these rights.[24] Such principles rule out absolute monarchies as ever being legitimate, and though Hume certainly sees the danger of abuse in such government, he finds the complete rejection of such forms of government hasty and dogmatic. In "Of Civil Liberty," he is clear that civilized, modern monarchies can allow for as much, if not more, liberty than ancient republics: "I must observe that all kinds of government, free and absolute, seem to have undergone, in modern times, a great change for the better, with regard both to foreign and domestic management" (*Essays*, 93).

Richard Dees has recently criticized Hume's criticism of the consent theorists. He claims that Hume misses an essential element in the argument of consent theories, namely, that they are not seeking a factual description of how governments arise and are maintained but, rather, are making the claim that "the only *legitimate* governments are the result of consent . . . . It is thus an entirely normative theory, not a normative theory based on falsities" (Dees, "Hume on Government," 395). If it is an entirely normative theory, Dees argues, Hume cannot show the theory false by looking at the facts. In particular, the fact that people think their government rightly commands their allegiance does not show that it actually does. Dees goes on to argue that the modern view that only democracies are legitimate forms of government shows that we have accepted something like a consent theory. This would lead to the conclusion, which Dees rightly claims Hume would find absurd, that no eighteenth-century government was truly legitimate. Locke, however, need not regard this result as absurd; "it may simply be the logical result of his inquiry" (ibid.).

This criticism of Hume's arguments against consent theories misses the point of his skeptical objection. It is normative recommendations based on philosophical fictions, ones that ignore experience and practice, that Hume claims are fallacious and dangerous. For Hume would ask what are such *a priori* universal principles based on? He would claim they are based simply on "the warm imagination" of the philosopher or, more likely, from an attempt to invent principles that serve his particular party or faction. Hume's criticism of such political philosophers is the same as his criticisms of "false" metaphysics discussed above. He would ask how we can apply principles to the actual world as we find it if these principles do not arise from this world. It is not simply that Hume has different criteria of legitimacy than does Locke. It is the whole project of forming such criteria that Hume's skepticism puts into question.

Of course Hume's skeptical criticism of this project would not likely faze those engaged in it. For the disagreement at this point concerns the very nature of political philosophy. Suppose that Locke, for example, sees political (and moral) philosophy as engaging in an attempt to discover what is truly good and right, beyond what anyone might call good or right. If so, Hume is attacking Locke (and others) for engaging in speculation that Locke would see as essential for doing political philosophy. What follows from Hume's skeptical conclusions, however, is that this very project is not coherent. Attempts to discover what is truly right or legitimate are just like attempts to discover the ultimate causes of our sensory perceptions or the secret powers that give rise to our notions of cause and effect. They take us into inquiries that, according to Hume, can "contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (EHU 12.27; SBN 163).

This skeptical acceptance of facts as the starting points for philosophical theorizing does not mean, however, that what *anyone* thinks is legitimate *is* so, or that there is no way for a skeptic to evaluate political systems. A skeptical politics can rank various governments in particular contexts according to how well they serve the interests of the citizens. As we have seen, one can even form generalizations based on observation and history that some political arrangements do a better job than others at balancing liberty and authority. However, one cannot rule out one form in advance; each kind of government can serve the interests of the population better or worse, depending on context and circumstance.[25]

In "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," Hume's main point is to show that it is possible to make certain generalizations about the nature and consequences of types of governments, regardless of the character and temperament of the rulers. For example, he says that the Venetian nobility is preferable to the Polish because they possess their power in common, which allows for more peace and stability. One of the most important conclusions he comes to is that overzealous attachment to a faction is corrosive to the public good: "There are enow of zealots on both sides who kindle up the passions of their partizans, and under pretence of public good, pursue the interests and ends of their particular faction. For my part, I shall always be more fond of promoting moderation than zeal" (*Essays*, 27). However, it is not clear that Hume would condemn all faction. In fact, he suggests that there might be a salutary balance of moderation and zeal when he says, "Let us therefore try, if it be possible, from the foregoing doctrine, to draw a lesson of moderation with regard to the parties, into which our country is at present divided; at the same time, that we allow not this moderation to abate the industry and passion, with which every individual is bound to pursue the good of his country" (*Essays*, 27). And he concludes at the end of the essay:

> [T]he *country-party* might still assert, that our constitution, though excellent, will admit of mal-administration to a certain degree; and therefore if the minister be bad, it is proper to oppose him with a *suitable* degree of zeal. And, on the other hand, the *court-party* may be allowed, upon the supposition that the minister is good, to defend, and with *some* zeal too, his administration. I would only persuade men not to contend, as if they were fighting *pro aris & focis*, and change a good constitution into a bad one, by the violence of their factions. (*Essays*, 30–31)

According to Hume, moderate, reasonable factions are acceptable, and perhaps even valuable.[26]

In "Of Parties in General," Hume elaborates further on the different kinds of factions, and it is even clearer which kind would be undermined by his skepticism. Here we see again his condemnation of factions: "Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other" (*Essays*, 55). But he divides factions into those formed from affection, from interest, and from principle. The one that is most pernicious is that based on principle. It rarely happens that a party is one purely of interest, but if it were, it would be much less worrying for Hume; he says such factions are "the most reasonable, and the most excusable" (*Essays*, 59).

One of the consequences of Hume's ideal commonwealth is that the danger of factions would be diminished: "Though it is more difficult to form a republic in an extensive country than in a city, there is more facility, when once it is formed, of preserving it steady and uniform, without tumult and faction" (*Essays*, 527). The republic would be divided into a multitude of counties, each of which would be autonomous in many respects. Each would elect a representative that would, in turn, elect the magistrates, who have legislative power, and a smaller body of senators, who are endowed with executive powers. Such divisions would make it much harder for one interest to dominate or for one interest to inspire the kind of mass movement in which zeal and enthusiasm make it impossible for legitimate concerns and interests to be aired in calm and moderation: "Divide the people into many separate bodies; and they may debate with safety, and every inconvenience seems to be prevented" (*Essays*, 523). In such an arrangement, competing interests would be aired, contributing to the public good; but no one group could get strong enough to tyrannize the others.

If we think about the nature of Hume's skepticism, it seems evident that the kind of zealous attachment to a cause that he condemns is incompatible with it. Hume ends the first book of the *Treatise* with a caveat, saying that if he uses words like "*'tis evident, 'tis certain,'tis undeniable*," "such expressions . . . imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other" (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 274). The zealous factions Hume condemns would have no problem claiming complete certainty. However, skepticism does not prohibit putting forth hypotheses, in the scientific as well as political realm. It is also perfectly possible for a skeptic to be in the business of clarifying both his own position and the positions of others. It is compatible with skepticism to say, for example, "I am a country gentleman, and it seems that this way of proceeding is in my interest and this other way is not." One could try to convince others that it would be more fair, or lead to more prosperity, to pass one law or proceed in one way rather than the other.

In the discussion of Whiggism above, we have already seen that one of the main features of Hume's skepticism is his call for moderation: a willingness to see the limits of one's own opinions and search for the value in others. Hume identifies this as one of the benefits of attention to the skeptical arguments that he puts forth at the end of the first *Enquiry*: "The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161). Reflection on skeptical arguments "would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161). Although Hume often maintains this kind of moderation in his political opinions, he does seem to get more and more attached to some of his political views near the end of his life, one of those being his position on the American question.

Hume was in the minority among Scotsmen in supporting the American cause, advocating full independence very early on. He did not share the Americans' reasons for supporting independence and says of Benjamin Franklin, for example, that "I always knew him to be a factious man, and that Faction, next to Fanaticism, is, of all passions, the most destructive of Morality" (*Letters*, 2:286). We can take it he means faction based on principle, including principles that get articulated in the Declaration of Independence, which Hume quite likely saw before he died. Hume would have little sympathy for its appeals to natural law and inalienable rights. From Hume's point of view, this document smacks of false philosophy, the kind that imposes its "conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles." And yet, when Hume's friend Baron Mure asks him to write a letter to lobby the king to take a tough line on the colonies, he declines, saying, "I am an American in my Principles, and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper" (*Letters*, 2:303).

When Hume says he is an American in his principles, he does not mean that he accepts the abstract and universal principles that are invoked by the writers of the Declaration of Independence. His criticisms of those philosophers who invoked the idea of the original contract would apply to the Americans as well. He rejects the use of such principles in his "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences":

> To balance a large state or society, whether monarchical or republican, on general laws, is a work of so great difficulty, that no human genius, however comprehensive, is able, by the mere dint of reason and reflection, to effect it. The judgments of many must unite in this work: Experience must guide their labour: Time must bring it to perfection: And the feeling of inconveniencies must correct the mistakes, which they inevitably fall into, in their first trials and experiments. (*Essays*, 124)

Therefore, when he says he is American in his principles, Hume must mean the kind of general principles based on careful observation and study that can be stated about empire and colonies, about when a society matures to the point that they can be left to manage on their own, about the advantages of trade, and the dangers of taxing a land for the benefit of the center. None of these are certainties; they are hypotheses and generalizations, but they can be appealed to both to criticize the current regime and suggest ways of change. And all such theorizing is becoming of a skeptic; because a skeptic questions, all he can both support reform and also criticize reformers.

In Craig Walton's discussion of Jefferson's changing attitude towards Hume's *History*, we can see how Hume's support was not the kind Jefferson wanted and why he eventually banned Hume's *History* from the University of Virginia. Jefferson wanted clear good guys and bad guys in his history, with the bad ones supporting monarchy and the good ones supporting liberty.[27] Walton contends that it is ultimately just the kind of skeptical spirit I have been attributing to Hume that Jefferson could not abide. The following remark from Walton is a good summation of a core element of Hume's philosophy: "No judgment or belief could be made 'safely,' free from the tensions of paradox, ambiguity or partiality" (Walton, "Hume and Jefferson," 396). This recognition of the lack of absolute grounding led Jefferson to see Hume as unable to judge the American beliefs to be better than those of their enemies. In a number of letters discussing the colonies, Hume makes it clear that subduing them would require governing them, which would waste resources and energy that could be better spent elsewhere. What would be most advantageous, he thinks, is to let them go and have them as a trading partner. He could not share in his peers' view that it was England's right to govern them any more than he could share Jefferson's view that it was the Americans' right to govern themselves.

3. The Status of Hume's Normative Assessments: Beyond Contextualism

Hume's stance on the American issue is entirely pragmatic, and one may wonder if ultimately a skeptical politics must be only and purely pragmatic, given skepticism's abhorrence of *a priori* principles. Dees seems to think so; he says, "Ultimately, I think, we should see Hume's appeal to moderation and his general political theory as a kind of pragmatism: governments are set up to solve certain problems. As other problems and possibilities arise, governments often prove to be useful tools" (Dees, 404). A number of times in my discussion of what makes Hume's politics skeptical, I have emphasized the need for recognizing contexts before pronouncing whether a particular political arrangement, decision, or attitude is the best or proper one. In an earlier discussion, Dees argues that Hume's politics are radically contextualist, saying that "the cultural and political context are the most important elements of any judgment about political change."[28] He acknowledges that Hume has principles on which he can rely in making judgments but insists that these principles themselves are "as much a part of the cultural context as the economic development of the society or its technological prowess" ("Contexts of Politics," 221). He also argues that the content of most of these principles is so general that they cannot help much in practical guidance.

Dees's main argument for showing the centrality of context in Hume's politics focuses on Hume's differing treatments of the Glorious revolution of 1688 and Henry Bolingbroke's rebellion of 1399. The one clear principle Hume offers for justified rebellion is that a people may rebel when faced with tyranny, but he saw neither Richard II nor James II as tyrants; he nonetheless approves of the later revolution and disapproves of the earlier. Dees offers the following quotation from Hume's *History* to support this view:

> All the circumstances of this event, compared to those which attended the late revolution in 1688, show the difference between a great and civilized nation, deliberately vindicating its established privileges, and a turbulent and barbarous aristocracy, plunging headlong from the extremes of one faction into those of another. ("Contexts of Politics," 237)

It is very difficult to state what, *in principle*, distinguishes one event from the other. Dees argues that the difference lies only in the historical context. By 1688, to dispense with Parliament, even if not tyrannical, was a grievous enough attack on what liberty and security this society had come to know that rebellion was justified. But there were no similar principles to which the fourteenth-century actors could appeal; the practices were confused and disordered, what principles prevailed depended on what faction was most powerful. In such circumstances, it seems nothing short of tyranny could justify rebellion.

Neil McArthur emphasizes Hume's pragmatism in his discussion of the nature of Hume's conservatism. He calls Hume's view "precautionary conservatism," meaning a conservatism that always includes a presumption in favor of maintaining the status quo because of the risk of chaos. He contrasts this to the kind of conservatism he calls "traditionalist," which would favor reform if it can be legitimated by the customs and traditions of a people. The precautionary conservative will be more cautious because he is guided primarily by prudence and not principle. For example, a traditionalist may favor overturning a revolutionary government to return to the customs of the pre-revolutionary age, while the precautionary conservative would not if the government had managed to effect stability and peace (McArthur, *David Hume's Political Theory*, 122–24). As McArthur puts it, Hume "draws a sharp distinction between justification and prudence, with prudence being the salient variable that determines our actions" (126).

Even if we accept McArthur's claim that Hume would never think that radical social change can be justified simply to restore an older order, to say that for Hume prudence is always our guide is misleading and gives the impression that Hume is more of an extreme pragmatist than he is. For, as we have seen, Hume has found a way to formulate certain basic, general principles of politics, and it seems these principles can be appealed to in support of change (albeit of a gradual and peaceful kind). Because customs and traditions cannot be ultimately justified, they can be subverted if they undermine certain principles. It is true that these principles might ultimately have a pragmatic or prudential grounding, but nonetheless they are general principles. Hume need not just say we must keep things as they are because to do otherwise is too risky. That Hume's view is more complex is evident if we think about his view of the Americans; his principles there dictated undermining the status quo.

McArthur's discussion of the nature of Hume's conservatism comes at the end of his book, one in which he has been at pains to show that Hume has a consistent and important legal and political theory, one which is original and historically important: "among all the early advocates for liberal, commercial society, Hume is arguably the most compelling" (McArthur, 3). He argues that, for Hume, one can rank political arrangements based on their level of "civilization," which is closely connected to the level of "humanity" one finds in society. Near the end of his book, McArthur says that its task has been "to explain the standards Hume uses for judging certain governments to be better than others, and how these standards are grounded in his philosophy as a whole" (McArthur, 135). In doing so, he argues against the view that Hume's skepticism rules out any abstract principles by which we can judge different regimes. Thus, he clearly agrees with me that Hume has principles to appeal to in his political evaluations and that these go beyond the contextual assessments described by Dees.

What it seems, then, that McArthur is pointing to when emphasizing the prudential element of Hume's judgments is the gap that we often find between what is ideal and what is practical. We are often struck by the difference between the campaigning politician and the same politician once he takes office. It is often said that the politician has given up on his ideals. In fact, he may still possess the ideals but recognizes that to try to implement them would be so imprudent as to risk making things worse. Thus, a precautionary conservative can maintain universal principles about what makes one government better than another, but such conservatism "makes it possible to distinguish between the validity of political ideals and the wisdom of actually implementing them—between, we might say, justification and prudence" (McArthur, 125). It is possible, then, that *if* Bolingbroke's reasons for rebellion were founded on the idea that his accession would allow for a more civilized and humane society, Hume could approve of this as an appropriate *justification* for rebellion even while disapproving of the rebellion itself, given the historical context.

McArthur introduces this distinction between prudence and principle to make sense of the many statements that have led to conservative interpretations of Hume's politics. Is it actually conservative? Is the call for modesty, humility, caution, and openness conservative? As Dees points out, Hume's theory of government has been appropriated by nearly every part of the political spectrum.

However, labels of "conservative" or "liberal" had no application in Hume's own time. Moreover, one can find aspects of his thought that would ally him with both sides of the spectrum.[29] To label Hume's political position, it would be better to ask: What is a politics devoid of ideology, party, and faction? and what is a politics that vacillates and is ambivalent?

A skeptic cannot adopt what one would normally term a political philosophy of any kind. A skeptic cannot be a conservative or a liberal; neither can he be a contractarian or a utilitarian. All these positions seem to rely on certain bedrock presuppositions that are founded on the kind of philosophy Hume would call "false." Skeptical philosophy is very unsatisfying to those who seek to penetrate into a deeper reality. When one seeks to know the cause of one's perceptions, what constitutes the self, a way to justify the belief that the future will resemble the past, one will find Hume's responses lacking. The same holds true of his response to questions about the proper principles of government. Here, as elsewhere, we find Hume can only offer "reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (EHU12.25; SBN162) He cannot offer any principles beyond those reflections. These principles—such as "the balance of power is supremely important to a society's health" or "commerce is apt to decay in absolute governments"—will tell against certain courses of action and support others. These general principles are like those that guide our reasoning. In neither domain do our principles have ultimate rational support; we only have our limited perspective and experience that shows that proceeding according to them serves our interests and sentiments better than other ways.

This may seem like a misguided analogy, for when it comes to our belief, for example, that the future resembles the past or our belief that there is a world of external and independently existing objects, Hume tells us that no reasoning could eliminate them. Recognizing that they have no rational support will not dislodge these beliefs as it would most other beliefs. The universality of these so-called "natural" beliefs supports Hume's claims about their resilience. It does not seem that one finds equally universal beliefs in the political realm. But if we take care to keep the comparisons between the political and the epistemological at the proper level, we can see that the analogy is a strong one. Beliefs that cannot be eradicated are very general, for example, the belief that the past resembles the future or the belief that like causes have like effects. These beliefs are shared by the vulgar and wise alike; they may even be shared with animals. They provide a very general framework, and once this framework is accepted, it becomes possible to evaluate other beliefs based on whether they are supported by good reasoning or not.

One can accept the very general belief that causes are *necessarily* connected to their effects and still end up with many specific beliefs that will not hold up to rational scrutiny. It is clear that Hume thinks beliefs which *do* conform to the dictates of good and "just" reasoning are *better* than ones that are not. Hume provides guidelines for forming wise beliefs and for avoiding common pitfalls that lead one away from the path of the wise in Book 1, sections 11–13 and 15 of the *Treatise*, and in section 10 of the first *Enquiry*, he famously tells us that "[a] wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence" (EHU 10.4; SBN 110). What entitles Hume to such normative assessments, given his skeptical conclusions combined with his view of beliefs as essentially passive, has been a subject of much scholarly controversy. My view is that Hume's normative assessments of beliefs are ultimately grounded in his view that we would organize ourselves in a more fair and just manner if more people regulated their beliefs according to the rules of good reasoning.[30]

Turning to Hume's normative assessment of political systems and practices, we find something very similar. At the most fundamental level, one would find a platitude like "societies allowing for maximal human flourishing are the best." That happiness and flourishing are final goods is uncontroversial; asking why they are good seems misguided. But, of course, as Aristotle points out, what one thinks constitutes happiness or flourishing can vary, so one of Hume's still very general principles could perhaps be questioned, for example, the one that says, "Societies that allow for peace, stability and liberty are the best." Perhaps one can point to some great works of art or literature that were developed in a society guided by terror and tumult and argue that these are examples of great human flourishing. This would be analogous to questioning whether wise reasoning practices are the best by pointing out that great works of literature (for example, *The Bible* and *The Odyssey*) were written when people did not generally have the same capacity to discover truths about the world as we do today. That wonderful creations occur in non-optimal circumstances does not undermine the idea that we should guide our reasoning to get the truth while recognizing that one of our rules for such guidance can end up being undermined. Likewise, we should guide our political structures and governments to get more peace and stability while recognizing that one of our rules for such guidance could end up being undermined.

We see, then, the importance of "general rules" in both domains. Dees argues that the general rules in politics are so general as to be essentially void of content. To say "rebellion is justified when the government no longer serves the central interests of society" or "rebellion is justified when faced with tyranny" will not provide one with much guidance unless one knows what counts as "tyranny" or what counts as "central interests," and this can only be determined, says Dees, when we attend to the particularities of the contexts. It could be that my disagreement with Dees about characterizing Hume's political philosophy as "contextualist" is a disagreement about degrees, about the degree of content or vacuity found in these general principles or general rules.[31] I think some have more content than others, as is true in the epistemological domain as well. The rule that one ought to proportion one's belief to the evidence does not tell one much without more details about what counts as evidence, but one can easily apply the rule "do not rely on general rules that are contradicted by present observation and experience" as these are likely to be prejudices that lead one away from the truth. Hume's statement, for example, that "the Republican Form of [Government] is by far the best" allows for a straightforward normative assessment and guidance, one that need not attend to the particularities of context.

Hume reminds us, maybe most vividly in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, that we are social creatures; our need to live together is as inescapable as our need to form beliefs, which, Hume says, is just as inescapable as our need to breathe and feel. Just as the discovery that no ultimate grounding can be provided for causal reasoning should not lead us to give up on the practice of causal reasoning, neither should the discovery that there is no ultimate, justifying explanation for why one form of government is better than another mean that we should give up on the practice of defending or fighting for certain political practices or arrangements. Our defense of the rules of good reasoning and the rules of good government will be similar; if more people choose reason as their guide, Hume thinks, our world would be less factious, more peaceful and stable. Likewise, adherence to certain political principles and arrangements will allow for more peace and stability. But can we say that more peaceful and stable societies are *better* than tumultuous, unstable ones? It seems true from all that we know and have seen that human beings feel better and thrive more in such societies, and this reveals their superiority.

NOTES

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1 *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (New Edition; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), 3.75–76.

2 David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987), hereafter cited in the text as "*Essays*" followed by page number.

3 David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 12.

4 Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6.

5 This discussion is found in Richard Dees, "'One of the Finest and Most Subtile Inventions': Hume on Government," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth Radcliffe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 388–405.

6 Neil McArthur, *David Hume's Political Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5.

7 References to the first *Enquiry* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), hereafter cited in the text as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph; and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter cited as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

8 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

9 This brief discussion of skepticism summarizes a longer discussion of the connections between Hume's skepticism and his positive philosophy found in my paper, "Hume, Wittgenstein and the Impact of Skepticism," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21 (2004): 417–34.

10 Craig Walton, "Hume and Jefferson on the Uses of History," in *Hume A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 389–403.

11 Here Walton is quoting from David Hume, *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second*, 6 vols. (Boston: publisher, 1852), 6:365–66. For further discussion of Hume's view of factions in the *History of England*, see Mark Spencer, "Hume and Madison on Faction," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (2002): 869–96. Spencer points out that Hume criticizes extreme factions in the History, "but moderate party affiliation is shown to be innocuous or even praiseworthy" (881).

12 *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), hereafter cited in text as "*Letters*" followed by volume and page number.

13 James Moore, "Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 10 (1977): 809–39.

14 Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 126.

15 Forbes spends the next seven pages giving representative examples of these vulgar whig sentiments.

16 Dees, 400. See further 397–403.

17 J. G. A. Pocock, "Hume and the American Revolution: The Dying Thoughts of a North Briton," in *McGill Hume Studies*, eds. D.F Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. Robison, (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 325–343, 332.

18 Neil MacArthur's introduction does a nice job of canvassing representations of this view, one of which he argues against. See Neil McArthur, *David Hume's Political Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 1–6. Perhaps the most well known and explicit formulation of this view is found in Donald Livingston's *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), where he says that Hume should be considered the first conservative philosopher (311). I will return to the question of Hume's conservatism in section 3 where I will also discuss MacArthur's view. Some fairly early examples of discussions which question the link between skepticism and conservatism—arguing instead that skepticism can potentially be linked to some kind of liberalism or politics that support reform—are found in David Fate Norton's "An Introduction to Hume's Thought," *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–33, especially 23–25, in John B. Stewart's *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), and in John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume and Kant* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992). None of these discussions, however, take it as their central thesis that one can come to a better understanding of Hume's politics by seeing his view as a natural outgrowth of his skepticism. Norton may be an exception, but his discussion, being merely three pages, is only suggestive.

19 In statements like this I seem to align myself with those who see Hume's politics as radically contextualist. In section 3, I discuss the possibility of making normative assessments that go beyond particular contexts.

20 See Moore, "Hume's Political Science," 809–13 for further discussion of how politics may be treated as a science. An extensive discussion of Hume's "science of man" and how it can lead to quite ambitious generalizations while remaining consistent with Hume's skepticism is found in Eric Schliesser's, "Hume's Attack on Newton's Philosophy," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 25 (2009): 167–203.

21 References to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* ed. Tom. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter cited in the text as "EPM" followed by section and paragraph, and to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

22 Moore, for example, suggests that this kind of theorizing is consistent with Hume's "scientific" approach: " For if it is part of the vocation of an experimental political scientist to judge forms of government and policy in terms of their usefulness to human nature, then it is consistent with this role that the political scientist should also recommend certain forms of political life as more useful or effective than others" ("Hume's Political Science," 813). John Robertson makes a similar point about the kind of theorizing involved in Hume's "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." He says that if Hume's description is going to serve as a model "(as opposed to *a priori* speculation), the perfect commonwealth must, by Humean definition, comply with custom: its principles must be derived from historical and existing forms of government, and be applicable in the various circumstances in which governments are actually established" (171–72). After arguing that Hume does offer such a model, Robertson says, "It is a commonplace that Hume's was a sceptical politics: but just as too narrow a choice may limit the assessment of his politics, so indifference to its intellectual context may vulgarize the quality of his

skepticism" (177). See John Robertson, "The Scottish Enlightenment and the Limits of the Civic Tradition," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. István Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 137–78.

23 Immediately Hume adds in parentheses, "if that be not a contradiction in terms." True philosophers, that is, philosophers who conduct themselves upon skeptical principles, could not embrace a party without contradiction.

24 See Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 11, especially section 135.

25 This way of thinking about political organization is very similar to the way Montesquieu discusses these questions, and Hume had great admiration for his approach to politics. Montesquieu distinguishes between the nature of a form of government and its "*principe*." One can define the nature of a particular form of government—that is, what defines it as such—in the abstract. So, for example, a democracy is a form of government where power is shared among its citizens. But one will not be able to understand or evaluate these forms of government without looking at ways in which they are actively expressed. And the way in which any form of government is actively expressed is through human passions.

Like Hume, to support his contentions, Montesquieu turns to specific examples of recent and ancient history. He avoids making sweeping normative claims about one form of government being better than another while showing the advantages and disadvantages of each, observing which qualities tend to flourish in each kind. Still, we should not lose sight of the idea that a skeptical politics, like skepticism in general, can still make useful generalizations with the advantage of these generalizations not being tainted by prejudices. Hume thinks that this makes them more likely to be true. The next section will discuss one such skeptical generalization.

26 For further discussion of Hume's mixed attitude towards factions, see Jennifer Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially 197–218.

27 Not all the framers of the Constitution reacted to Hume in the same way and not all agreed on what principles should be invoked in the Constitution. It seems Hamilton had great sympathy for Hume's approach and even quotes the lines I quoted above from "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" at the end of the final essay of the *Federalist Papers* (Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* 85, Project Gutenberg, 1992: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_85.html based on the McLean edition, New York, 1788). He then comments on them as follows: "These judicious reflections contain a lesson of moderation to all the sincere lovers of the union, and ought to put them upon their guard against hazarding anarchy, civil war, a perpetual alienation of the states from each other, and perhaps the military despotism of a victorious demagogue, in the pursuit of what they are not likely to obtain, but from TIME and EXPERIENCE" (*Federalist Papers*, 85, "Concluding Remarks," emphasis in original). It seems, further, that Hume had a great influence on Madison, which can be seen particularly in Federalist 10 and Federalist 51. Federalist 10 argues against the common view that a republic cannot be extended to a large territory, and he says further that such an arrangement would likely allow for a decrease in factions, clearly echoing Hume's views in "The Perfect Commonwealth." For further discussion of Hume's influence on Madison, see Moore, "Hume's Political Science," Spencer, "Hume and Madison on Faction," as

well as Douglas Adair, “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science: David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth Federalist,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 20 (1957): 343–60.

28 Richard Dees, “Hume and the Contexts of Politics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 219–42, 220.

29 Dees lists some of these in “Hume on Government,” 404. I have found that those who engage with this question are much more likely to put him on the conservative side.

30 I argue for this view in “Why Should We Be Wise?” *Hume Studies* 31 (2005): 3–19.

31 For an interesting discussion of how Hume’s principles concerning religious toleration go beyond the mere “politic,” see Andrew Sabl, “The Last Artificial Virtue: Hume on Toleration and Its Lessons,” *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 511–38.