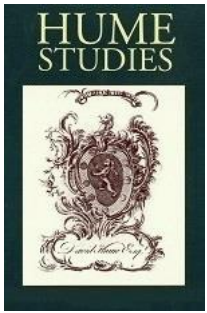

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The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith by Paul Sagar (review)

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Paul Sagar's *The Opinion of Mankind* serves as an excellent synthesis of the topics of sociability and sovereignty in the history of modern political thought. The main thrust of the book is to marshal David Hume's and Adam Smith's resources as first-rate philosophers on behalf of a first-rate political theory. According to Sagar, Hume's and Smith's rich accounts of human sociability, sentiment, and historical contingency provide the foundations for what Sagar calls "the state without sovereignty" (18, 103–38). By this, he means that neither Hume nor Smith treat sovereignty as an *a priori* condition for state formation. Instead, Hume and Smith acknowledge states as modern political entities that manage themselves independently of any overarching theory. In Hume's terms, the "empire of philosophy extends over a few" ("The Skeptic," 169). We are better off examining citizens' evolving sympathy with their respective governments' utility and authority, rather than seeking external normative justifications for legitimacy.

This call for epistemic modesty and a non-ideal approach to politics will not be new to readers of *The Treatise* or *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*. However, Sagar is instructive in framing Hume's and Smith's political philosophies as a strategy for circumventing Thomas Hobbes. Anglophone political philosophy has long looked to Hobbes as its standard-bearer for the concept of sovereignty. For Sagar, Hobbes's legacy mainly consists in forging "artificial solutions to deep natural problems," whereby state sovereignty functions as a kind of "method" with unified and predictable political solutions (38). The Hobbesian method, Sagar thinks, has governed too much of political thought, from Rousseau to Kant to Rawls.

Hume and Smith, though, do not fear the monster of Malmesbury. By treating Hobbes's state of nature as no more than an "idle fiction," Hume side-steps the more vexing problems contained in Hobbes's contract theory (T.3.2.2.16; SBN 494). For Sagar, Hume's biggest departure from Hobbes is his emphasis on sympathy. Perceiving pride as a virtue, Hume believes mankind holds an enormous capacity to self-regulate. Far from needing to be curtailed by the sword, human beings, exercising sympathy, tend toward stability. The Hobbist word "artifice" does reemerge in Book 3, part 2 of the *Treatise*, when Hume famously describes justice as being "artificial." Yet justice is not artificial because its definition is imposed by the sovereign. Rather, Hume turns to early groups of families and tribes which establish conventions for respecting each other's possessions. In time, men

come to find these conventions pleasurable and, gradually, conventions extend beyond mere self-interest and support the sort of peaceful, cooperative society in which justice can function. As Sagar summarizes, "It was not the Leviathan that created justice as a sovereign decree . . . but justice that eventually created the Leviathan" (99).

This prompts Sagar to argue that Hume has no theory of sovereignty, nor does he ever search after one. Hume's idea of sympathy softens the brutish edges of Hobbesian pride, but without overstating the case for natural sociability, as Shaftsbury and Hutcheson do. In their attempts to refute Hobbes, both Shaftsbury and Hutcheson defend the "moral sense" and our innate human feeling for goodwill and order, which goes well beyond the order that Hume thinks we can develop in society.

Likewise, Sagar portrays Rousseau as another political theorist who fails to successfully work around Hobbes. Chapter 4 contends that, for all their differences regarding the natural condition, Rousseau cannot avoid agreeing with Hobbes when it comes to man's present, pitiless state. Rousseau tries to start from the premise of sociability and pity, but he acquiesces to Hobbes's structure, in which political representation is impossible and sovereignty is indivisible. Sagar thus reads Rousseau as many of his initial critics did: *The Social Contract* is "an exercise in full-blooded Hobbesian sovereignty theory" (158). The Rousseau chapter sits a little awkwardly in a book that is mostly concerned with Hume and Smith, but Sagar claims to read Rousseau "through a Scottish lens." Sagar points us to Smith's "A Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review," in which Smith compared Rousseau to Mandeville. Sagar's case would be stronger if Smith had likened Rousseau directly to Hobbes. It is true that many eighteenth-century thinkers, including Shaftsbury and Hutcheson, use Mandeville's pessimistic and pride-based arguments as a stand-in for Hobbism. However, this move seems to concede Hobbes's enormous power of influence—an influence that Sagar otherwise thinks we have over-emphasized.

Turning to Smith himself in chapters 5 and 6, Sagar approaches Smith as a political philosopher who offered "an internal critique" of Hume's political philosophy. Smith agrees with Hume that utility—and not pride or benevolence—was the main explanation behind human sociability. That said, Sagar notes that justice arises much sooner in Smith's account. Even before they adopt conventions to regulate property, Smith thinks humans have a propensity toward justice. This comes about from our natural resentment at seeing others harmed. Here sympathy is what engages us with our peers. The story, Sagar says, is still essentially Humean in the stress it places on large-scale sympathy, but Smith dissents to argue that we do not pursue utility for its own sake. Justice has the fortunate aggregate effect of promoting utility, although our daily interactions rarely have utility as the goal.

In a reading of Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Sagar sketches how Smith's view of utility and authority works in historical practice, from democratic shepherd societies to the House of Commons. When it comes to actual human history, opinion—not sovereignty—reigns. Sagar admits that the *Lectures*' note-taker uses the word "sovereign" to document Smith's account of legitimate power, but Sagar argues that such "sovereignty" is the equivalent of Smith's "*summa potestas*" (207). The *opinion* of legitimate power, not an abstract theory, still holds sway. This is persuasive enough, although, given how central this notion of the "state without sovereignty" is to the book's argument, Sagar should also acknowledge the moments in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* when Smith employs language of "the state or sovereignty." Smith's equivalency between state and sovereignty occurs first when he discusses our beneficent recommendation to society (VI.ii.2.2) and soon after, when he affirms the wise man's willingness to sacrifice his private interests on behalf of "the greater interest of the state or sovereignty" (VI.ii.3.3). Such terms need not be damaging to Sagar's thesis, since Smith seems to be treating the state and/or sovereignty simply as instantiations of human societies, rather than a grander Hobbesian theory, but the ambiguity should at least be noted. The same is true for Hume. His *History of England* is riddled with the language of sovereignty. Usually, Hume uses "sovereign" as a synonym for the monarch, but he refers to struggles for a more abstracted "sovereign power" as well.

Sagar is surely right that Hume and Smith abandon state-of-nature theories in favor of actual historical development, which makes it unfortunate that he forgoes a discussion of Hume's *History of England*. Sagar mentions that "the medieval volumes" explain the demise of the English barons (119), while "the Staurt and Tudor volumes" offer an answer to Montesquieu (190), but he passes over any specifics. Of course, the *History* spans six volumes and over one million words, but given Sagar's very thorough analysis of the role history plays in Smith, a few cases studies from Hume would be helpful. Edward IV's ability to attain the multitude's "public favor" at Saint Johns fields (vol. 2) or Elizabeth's brilliant ability to "overawe" parliament (vol. 4) come to mind. If Smith's analysis of opinion's authority is indeed more "detailed" than Hume's (192), a more explicit comparison with the *History* needs to prove this. Hume's colorful epic of England's monarchs presents an ideal testing-ground for studying states without sovereignty. Furthermore, it would be interesting to read Sagar's interpretation of Hume's remark, in Volume VI, that Hobbes was once seventeenth-century England's most "celebrated" prose stylist, though, "[i]n our time, he is much neglected" (153). Evidently, Hume did not find the weight of Hobbes's legacy especially burdensome.

All told, this is a well-crafted and persuasive contribution to Hume's and Smith's scholarship and the standing of Hume and Smith in modern political theory. Just as Smith advanced an "internal critique" of Hume, we might think

of Sagar internally critiquing the many Anglophone political philosophers who have been beholden to Hobbes for too long.

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