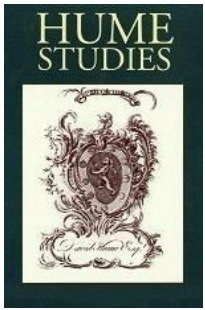

Andrew Sabl

All Style, No Substance? Comments on Harris's *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*

Hume Studies Volume 45, Number 1–2, 2019, pp. 17–27

Hume Studies
Volume 45, Number 1–2, 2019, pp. 17–27

All Style, No Substance? Comments on Harris's *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*

ANDREW SABL

This meticulous work, the product of years of scholarship and effort, contains a great deal to admire. It rightly rejects the frame, still common in philosophy departments, of Hume as someone who, after writing the *Treatise*, "abandoned philosophy" (with the possible exception of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*) for the sake of lesser inquiries like politics and history. It convincingly portrays Hume's vast classical learning as devoted, in the end, to modern conversations and modern purposes, not to the pursuit of ancient wisdom as directly therapeutic for individuals (194). It deftly places Hume's work not in a narrow Scottish or English context, but in the larger conversation of European letters, proving that Hume himself sought a central place in that conversation. It traces Hume's pervasive anti-Providentialism throughout works that are not usually read as evidence for it, drawing a portrait of Hume as the "disenchanted" thinker *par excellence* (382). Impressively mastering a great many works, it demonstrates how Hume endorsed central insights of the Tory historians Robert Brady and Thomas Carte, while rejecting their Tory conclusions. And it is outstanding on the details of Hume's multiple revisions and the contexts that evoked them, in particular on the ways in which the libertarian and anti-Scottish "Wilkes and Liberty" movement provoked both despairing letters to friends and substantial revisions to Hume's *Essays* and *History of England*.

All that said, I do differ substantially with the book's approach. Its emphasis on historical context, however welcome with respect to some of the questions above, leads it to assess Hume's work in narrow ways that often obscure the substance of what Hume was trying to say. Its determination to characterize Hume's "philosophical" project as a matter of promoting thoughtful, polite discourse, rather than as a search for enduring truths, both distorts

Andrew Sabl is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, 3018 Sidney Smith Hall, 100 St. George Street, Toronto ON M5S 3G3, Canada. Email: andrew.sabl@utoronto.ca

Hume's own proclaimed purposes and slights his permanent contributions. To focus on my own fields of expertise, Hume's history and political science: Harris's central thesis obscures the extent to which Hume sought a political science that would establish reliable laws (corrigible through "experience," i.e. data) and wanted to produce a history that would not just defuse partisan myths of his time, but also be worth reading far into the future. Yet more specifically: in evaluating Hume's *History* mostly through the lens of how it subverted Tory and Whig myths, Harris's work ends up unable to see—indeed, determined to deny—that Hume replaced those myths with a substantive *account of political authority* to which history, time, and experience remained central.

In general, I worry that this book makes Hume's life seem both more adverbial than it was, and more ephemeral. It portrays a Hume more devoted to promoting polite, judicious ways of thinking, conversing, and writing than to establishing—through systematic thought and empirical evidence—durable, often difficult, truths.

I. Contexts and Excluded Middles

Following Duncan Forbes, Harris is determined to read Hume's political works "in terms of their various contexts, intellectual and political" (13). (One short footnote dismisses David Miller and Frederick Whelan, widely considered very thoughtful scholars of Hume's political theory, on the grounds that they slight these contexts [476n59].) But what does this mean? Some intellectual historians stress the need to understand how the meaning of words change over time, or to appreciate that the questions that motivated past thinkers may have been very different from the allegedly "perennial" questions, really questions of our own time, that we are inclined to attribute to them. Harris, however, does not stress such problems of intellectual translation or understanding. His understanding of context is actually very different and surprisingly committal: "Hume *was not engaged* in the business of filling out an intellectual vision in abstraction from the world around him. He was acutely sensitive to the complexities of his time and place, and wrote, and corrected, out of a desire to show how philosophy might illuminate some of the deeper problems *faced by the age in which he lived*" (25, emphases added).

If forced to plump for one alternative or the other—Hume as aspiring to pure, abstract ratiocination, or else as minutely responsive to current events—one might, indeed, choose the latter. But these hardly exhaust the options. Hume might, like many philosophers and historians today, have *alternated* between months or years spent on intense scholarship, and other intervals spent engaging in political and social disputes. (E.C. Mossner's famous biography certainly leaves that impression.) More to the point, Hume's determination to apply the "experimental method of reasoning" to moral subjects might have led him to see "the world around him" as the necessary matter for thought whose validity would then transcend what he found in that world, in his own time and place. Hume might have been using his experience of his world, and his reading of its past, as sources of data—Hume was an early adopter of that word's modern sense—from which to derive general, though necessarily preliminary

and corrigible, propositions in what came to be called moral, social, and political theory (or, in a different mode, social science). The question is not whether Hume paid attention to the world, but how and to what purpose. Put differently: while Harris focuses on instances in which observing the events of the world led Hume to edit and amend his texts, we might just as profitably ask how that process of observation enabled Hume to draft the parts of his work—the great majority—that he did not see the need to amend, and that still endure.

II. Polite Manners vs. Theoretical Matter

Rejecting (rightly and convincingly) the thesis that Hume's entire *oeuvre* should be glossed as pursuing the project outlined in the *Treatise,* Harris maintains that all of Hume's work was philosophical in a different sense, involving intellectual style. What unifies Hume's works, Harris claims, is not a unified body of thought, but the "disengaged, skeptical, philosophical frame of mind of their author" (viii). What it means to be *philosophical* (Harris's emphasis) is, more specifically,

> to rise above the everyday and the particular and, from that vantage point, to identify and characterize general principles that were otherwise hard, if not impossible, to discern. This is philosophy understood not as a body of doctrine or a subject matter, but rather as a habit of mind, a style of thinking, and of writing, such as could in principle be applied to any subject whatsoever. (18)

Harris provides excellent examples of Hume himself both declaring and practicing an attachment to general principles that rise above particular examples; that was one thing Hume meant by "enlarg[ing]" one's perspective (20).

Yet there is something oddly missing from Harris' account of Hume's general principles—in the case of history, for examples, principles "able to explain long-term and large-scale social, political, economic, and cultural change" (20): namely, their substance. Nowhere does Harris clearly state what he thinks the fundamental principles of Hume's politics and history *are,* or whether they proved valid—actually and demonstrably better at explaining political and historical events, or more useful in telling us how to shape events so as to further good outcomes, than alternatives. On the contrary, all his summaries of Hume's fundamental principles are essentially negative (though accurate as far as they go). Harris documents, for example, that Hume faulted Harrington for his thesis that power followed property (Hume argued that opinion also matters [178f.]), and that Hume faulted the ancient constitution thesis, variously put forth by Whigs and opposition Tories, for imagining that English liberties could be traced back to the Saxons when their foundations were modern (see chapters 6 and 7). This way of thinking, however, leaves it difficult to discern what Harris thinks Hume *discovered* or *established.* If opinion matters, *how* does it matter: how can someone seeking political insights make sense of how opinions—in particular those of right to power—are likely to arise and change? If modern societies' liberties have a modern foundation, how should we

understand that foundation, perhaps so as to see when those liberties are crumbling, or to be able to form a strategy for shoring them up?

This evasion of substance seems to be by design. Harris strongly implies that he takes Hume's politeness to *be* his contribution. Even the point of seeking general principles seems to be a kind of misdirection. Hume, on Harris's portrayal, sought to defuse passionate convictions—especially partisan ones—not by establishing general principles, but rather by encouraging the reader to seek general principles, and then proceeding to show how elusive, and inherently controversial, such principles are. (Thus, Harris says that the Political Discourses promised "theorem[s]" but did not deliver them: Hume's project was "to 'start difficulties'. . . with the intention of stimulating surprise, puzzlement, and reflection in his readers" [282].) In describing Hume's engagement with, and pervasive moderation of, the partisan political and historical positions of his time, Harris portrays this not as necessary framing, the best practice of a rhetorician who must start from the audience's premises rather than his own, but as something like the pinnacle of Hume's achievement as a thinker:

> *The philosophical spirit* [of Hume's *History of Great Britain,* later *History of England*] expressed itself most clearly of all in those passages in which Hume sought to reduce political debates to their most essential and abstract principles, by balancing the best case that could be made on one side against the best that could be made on the other, and then presenting a considered judgement as to the strengths and weakness of each argument. (339, emphasis added)

There is nothing wrong with moderation. The above formulation, however, strikingly portrays Hume's final conclusions as stemming from his own good judgment, his native *phronesis*—not from an intellectual inquiry aiming at discovering and applying on general principles, an inquiry that (always? Harris seems to think so) produces nothing but antinomies.[1] In this respect, Harris believes that the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* resembled "all of Hume's works" in being "an attempt to help the reader to stand back from everyday practical concerns, and to consider the matter at hand in terms of its general principles" (456). And Hume's works, like the *Dialogues,* are apparently supposed to yield this happy effect of seeing things in terms of "general principles," even though—or better, precisely *because*—reasoning based on general principles yields no determinate conclusion. Hume's goal, on Harris's portrayal, is to induce reflection—not to communicate knowledge.

Harris repeatedly writes of Hume's attempt to draw his readers—perhaps, eventually and by long-term diffusion, educated society as a whole—into a philosophical *conversation* or *community* among people whose principles might differ quite fundamentally (see, e.g., 24, 30, 263, 298f., 305–306). Writing of the *Political Discourses* (part of what we now call the *Essays*), Harris writes:

> [Hume's] goal, usually, was to raise questions and provoke further thought, not definitively to establish a theoretical postulate. It mattered that he was *not* elaborating

> a systematic theory of commerce . . . . His intention would seem to have been to turn commerce into a subject of reflection and conversation for those who did not themselves have a direct interest in one or another of its branches (30, emphasis in original).

Consistent with this, Harris, on that page and others, is at pains to deny, as much as possible, the degree to which Hume's contributions to his many fields were original and exceptional. "Very often in *Political Discourses*," Harris writes, "the core argument of an essay was not Hume's own invention" (30). Hume's self-portrayal of himself in the *Treatise* as a "solitary revolutionary, occupied with tasks that no one before him had seen were there to be undertaken" is portrayed as both fictive and slightly embarrassing (213). Also consistent with this, Harris clearly prefers the "engaging and solicitous" tone of what became the two *Enquiries* to the *Treatise's* "aggressive self-assertion" (221). Finally, Hume's *History of England,* as we shall see, is portrayed as an artful synthesis-*cum*-denaturing of existing Whig and Tory tropes. Far from drawing from history his own set of conclusions, Hume essentially ends up saying (Harris believes) that history can teach us nothing. The result is to portray Hume's achievements as primarily those of a synthesizer and popularizer. He is always, in Harris's eyes, the "ambassador from the dominions of learning to those of conversation" (159 citing Hume, "Of Essay Writing," *Essays*, 535)—and never the prime minister of the former, making fundamental contributions to learning itself.

Harris's endorsement of the idea that "philosophy is not a discipline that is worth pursuing if it loses touch with the language and concerns of the ordinary educated reader" (232) sounds benign; I share Harris's frustration with the kind of analytic philosophy that aspires to match science in its technical precision and ability to make progressive discoveries. Taken literally, however, this claim is quite radical. Do we really value *only* the kind of philosophy that can be understood by polite readers picking up an essay in the evening? After all, Hume's conviction that easy philosophers would have more lasting fame than abstruse ones was one of his ideas that was as most obviously time-bound as it is clearly wrong. We no longer read Aristotle more than Cicero, and it now seems a bit silly that Hume thought *"Addison,* perhaps, will be read with pleasure, when *Locke* shall be entirely forgotten" (232, citing EHU 1.4; SBN 7).

Of course, Harris endorses Hume's final aspiration to render his work *both* rigorous and accessible, to "unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry, with clearness, and truth with novelty" (223, citing EHU 1.17; SBN 16). Harris, however, seems mostly to care about the second part. To cite a political example: Harris notes (237) that the essay "Of the Original Contract" shrinks Hume's *Treatise* attack on consent theory "almost to the point of perfunctoriness"; the shrunken version is far less philosophical and implies that contract theory can be disproven solely by common sense. Harris seems quite unconcerned, however, that the result is to render the argument far from sound, with many striking insights but also clear gaps in reasoning that undergraduates quickly note. In general, it seems quixotic to try to capture accurately Hume's life as a man of letters while abstracting from such questions of substance. Such abstraction will make it impossible

to tell the difference between someone who *successfully* combined rigor with accessibility, and someone who tragically (or even defensibly) sacrificed much of the former for the latter's sake.

The determination to portray Hume as overwhelmingly concerned with anti-dogmatism and polite disagreement likewise makes it hard to understand how he could have striven to make his historical writing a permanent achievement. Harris cites Hume's remark, in a letter to John Clephane, that there was "no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of history" (308). But Harris does not consider Philip Hicks' convincing argument that Hume really meant it—that he aspired to be read, like Thucydides with respect to Greece, or Tacitus with respect to Rome, as the classic historian of England and in English, permanently and perennially instructive.[2] On the contrary, he portrays Hume, much as Forbes did, as chiefly concerned with smoothing over contemporary partisan squabbles. In describing "how Hume wanted his history writing to be read," Harris stresses not his findings, or even his method, but his impartial ethos: he wanted it read "as the work of one who was a member of neither party, and who was able to identify the faults, as well as the merits, of both" (387). And again: "[w]hat Hume wanted his reader to be impressed, and amused, by was the way he played his predecessors off against each other, making Tory points against Whig orthodoxy" (405). This does not describe the attitude of someone who was aware that the squabbles of party politics were evanescent—who, indeed, worked mightily to render them so—while hoping that, once those squabbles had been dispelled, the positive contribution of his work might endure. Deftly deconstructing the debates of the day is a fine thing, but no path to Parnassus.

None of this is to deny that Hume aspired to disagree, politely, with those who differed with his claims and conclusions. It is to suggest that the reason we still care about Hume concerns the genius behind those claims and conclusions, and the arguments on which they rested. Hume's civility towards critics and his zeal to recommend such civility towards others were admirable traits—but rather more common, less worth remembering, than the substance of what he discovered.

I suspect that one reason that Harris slights Harris's permanent contribution to the study of human subjects is that he doubts that such are possible. He seems to think of moral subjects as matters of rhetoric and debate all the way down. (This would explain another excluded middle: Harris prefers to portray Hume as addressing a variety of contemporary problems rather than as devoting his whole life to pure philosophy—but does not consider that he might have sought, and discovered, enduring contributions to what became political science, political economy, or history.) But then we are reduced to thinking of Hume as solely a man of his time, comprehensible and admirable if one enters deeply into the purposes of eighteenth-century Britons or Europeans and not otherwise.

III. Custom and Fundamentals: Crown and Charter

In answering the question posed above—if politics rests on opinion, on what does opinion rest?—the common (and correct) first stab at a Humean answer is "custom." Opinions rest on mental habits, and habits on repeated experience. This suggests in turn that of all the potential

sources of authority that Hume mentions in the *Treatise,* the most solid (when one can get it) is "long possession": people feel allegiance to the regime that they, and others on whose experience they draw, are used to. In *Hume's Politics*,[3] I have read the *History of England* as essentially an extended reflection on this: on the fundamental conventions defining authority, and the limitations on authority, that arise from historical experience. On my view, for which I cannot properly argue here, the fundamental conventions that Hume regards as having arisen in England are hereditary monarchy—eventually, a monarchy limited by law—on the one hand, and Magna Carta on the other. The latter allowed for the rise of parliament, at first very limited in its powers but over time increasingly strong, culminating in what was in Hume's time still a mixed and balanced regime (though one Hume well knew to be unstable).

Again, Harris seems deeply committed to denying that Hume's work contains this systematic account of authority *or any other.* If Hume's program was to cultivate polite conversation and respect for intellectual adversaries by showing that appeals to general principles are both necessary and aporetic (notwithstanding Harris's denial that Hume's intention was to draw therapeutic effects from ancient philosophical schools, he clearly portrays Hume's work as deliberately therapeutic in this more indirect, and more modern, way), then it would be impossible for Hume to have stood behind any law-like, general, and non-intuitive explanation of politics, history, economics, or culture. Even a tentative law, corrigible by further experience, would undermine the suspense of judgment, the benign and polite self-doubt, that Harris takes to be Hume's central goal. On this account, even if Hume did think he had discovered general truths, he would have had to hide them, lest his readers come to think that they know something important.

Beyond Harris's general determination not to find in Hume systematic doctrines of any kind, however, there are more specific reasons that Harris' approach prevents him from doing justice to the role of monarchy and Magna Carta in Hume's thought—to the extent of barely mentioning that they play any role at all.

First, Harris assumes (perhaps drawing the assumption from the "Cambridge School" of historical analysis) that *the* big constitutional question in Hume's age—perhaps all ages—concerns the form of government: republic or monarchy? Thus, when Harris rightly glosses Hume as being relatively indifferent to the question of forms of government, or at least determined to draw complex and nuanced conclusions on the subject (see the excellent discussion around 341–42), he concludes that Hume was therefore indifferent to constitutional questions.[4] This places beyond the reader's notice Hume's determination to treat the nature, origin, and limits of all authorities, whatever they may be: his account of how various bodies have each come to embody a certain measure of authority, and in what respects none of them exert effective, recognized authority in certain areas regarded as beyond their scope. Thus, Harris portrays Hume as thinking Magna Carta "less than revolutionary" because it "contained no establishment of new courts, magistrates, or senates, nor abolition of the old," only forbidding "such tyrannical practices as are incompatible with civilized government, and, if they become very frequent, are incompatible with all government" (398, citing *History* 1:487, App. II). The obvious rejoinder is that when such prohibitions become an unquestioned limitation on what

government may do, that is a slow constitutional revolution—not in government's form but, just as important, in its permissible scope.

Harris' approach to the *History* is also hindered by what seems to be misplaced interpretive charity. Probably because he regards the principle of hereditary monarchy as faintly ridiculous, Harris is determined to read Hume as believing that the Glorious Revolution put it in its place once and for all, making it a matter of parliamentary sufferance rather than constitutional principle. The result is one of the book's few demonstrable misreadings. Here is Harris:

> Hume saw it as obvious that something dramatic and quite novel happened in 1688–9. The Revolution, he wrote, 'forms a new epoch in the constitution,' it 'made a new settlement,' and it did so in so far as it established a *new precedent*, that of 'deposing one King, and establishing a new family,' thereby 'put[ting] a period' to the principle of hereditary succession (338, emphasis in original).

But the text in question says nothing about abolishing the principle of heredity; quite the contrary. Here is Hume (in the standard edition, not appreciably different from the one Harris cites, *History* 6: 531):

> By deciding many important questions in favour of liberty, and still more, by that great precedent of *deposing one king, and establishing a new family*, it [The Glorious Revolution] gave such an ascendant to popular principles, as has put the nature of the English constitution beyond all controversy. . . .
>
> To decry with such violence, as is affected by some, the whole line of Stuart; to maintain, that their administration was one continued encroachment on the incontestible rights of the people; is not giving due honour to that great event, which not only put a period to *their* hereditary succession, but made a new settlement of the whole constitution. (Emphases added.)

Hume here states quite clearly, not that the revolution "put a period" to hereditary succession, but that it ended the continuation of that succession in the Stuart line—in favor of establishing the hereditary succession of a new line (a succession that persisted not only through Hume's day, but even through ours). In "Of the Protestant Succession" (note the language), Hume imagines advocates of continuing the Hanover line on the one hand, or restoring the Stuart line on the other. The Stuarts' partisan, naturally, places the constitutional advantages of heredity—which Hume, both there and in his own voice, argues are very considerable—above even parliament's claims to authority. Even the Hanoverians' defender, however, does not defend Parliament's power to place the Crown where it will. On the contrary, this imagined advocate stresses the benefits of Parliament's having chosen a monarch "*in the royal line*"—thus preventing non-royal "ambitious subjects" from aspiring themselves to the job—and rendering "the crown *hereditary* in his [the Prince of Hanover's] family" (*Essays*,

506; emphases added). Thus, Harris fails to see the whole point of the Revolution as Hume saw it. It did not abolish the central constitutional principle of hereditary monarchy, but rather settled it on a firmer footing by establishing a family that shared Britons' accustomed (Protestant) religion, and balanced that principle against the privileges and powers of Parliament.

Hume was, in fact, deeply attached to hereditary monarchy and saw its having become slowly embedded in British constitutional habits as a key reason for the peace and order that Britons had come to prize. Because he is determined to downplay the role that hereditary monarchy played in Hume's history-based praise of Britain's constitution, Harris is forced to portray Hume's historical judgments as less consistently reasoned and more haphazard than they are. To take just one example: in describing why Hume rejected Thomas Carte's defense of Richard III (*qua* courageous, prudent, and just, exercising the "power and pride of conquest"), Harris writes that "Hume was not prepared to violate the conventions of Whig history to that extent." But he does not explain why Hume endorsed those conventions in this case: in fact, he condemned Richard because of the enormity of his departure from hereditary succession. "Never was there in any country an usurpation more flagrant than that of Richard," wrote Hume, "or more repugnant to every principle of justice and public interest" (H 2.508). Richard III's admitted "courage and capacity . . . would never have made compensation to the people for the danger of the precedent" of that departure from hereditary right (H 2.518).

Once again, I suspect that Harris avoids attributing this view to Hume out of attempted interpretive charity. Those living in parliamentary regimes are taught to regard the idea of limiting parliament's sovereign authority—even, perhaps especially, its constitutional authority—as both incoherent and pernicious. Yet a more sober look at absolute parliamentary supremacy (or any other doctrine of absolute sovereignty for that matter) reveals that it cannot resolve some obvious paradoxes, most notably the question of whether a sovereign parliament may pass a law stipulating that future parliaments may not change that law. The necessary conclusion, a cliché among philosophers of law but apparently no one else, is that no parliament—no authority whatsoever, in fact—can be sovereign both at all times and over all things. One might even conclude that any sound doctrine of law must at some point be—like Hume's—an "acceptance" theory, appealing not to the formal prerogatives of the allegedly supreme law-making body, but to that body's convention-based ability or inability to have the laws it passes recognized as binding.[5]

Another act of interpretive charity, I think, accounts for Harris' portrayal of Hume's history as self-effacing. Harris glosses Hume's *History* as concluding that "the past had no political significance. Politically speaking, it was the present, and the future, that mattered. History should be left to historians" (406). To be sure, Harris is quite right that the justification of any constitution, for Hume, was interest: that constitution's ability to embody authority and uphold justice in ways that made all those subject to government better off. He is also right that Hume saw modern politics as not needing "the kind of support from history that both Whigs and Tories usually supposed it to need" (321)—history consisting of myths of royal prerogative flouted, or ancient liberties and privileges eroded, of romantic Lost Causes or providentially progressive change. However, Hume saw politics as requiring *another* kind

of support from history, the kind that showed how politics goes better when conventions of authority, and of the limits on authority, develop over time and grow stronger the longer they continue. Interest explains why we are all better off when we recognize some convention of authority. History explains which one, and why we are better off embracing the conventions we have than aiming at new ones—since the latter attempt is likely to split the country into partisans of more than one convention, none of which is universally acknowledged.

Harris clearly thinks it a compliment to Hume to portray him as saying that the past does not bind us, that politics is wholly up to us in the present. I would question that. Would we really want all the fixed points we use to plan our lives—our property in our homes and effects, our rights against arbitrary interference, our ability to assert a private realm where others' political whims cannot reach, our accustomed sense of what counts as just and unjust—to be subject to reversal at the whim of a sovereign legislature? If we do say yes, I submit, we do not really mean it. Those of us who defend absolute sovereignty in theory do so on the tacit assumption that it will encounter limits in practice beyond which sovereign action is unthinkable. It is because so much of politics is not up to us, not generally a conceivable object of political action, that our lives in all realms other than politics are sometimes tolerable.

IV. Hume's Achievement

Befitting a work that sees Hume's main purpose as "philosophical conversation" (24), Harris's book ends with Hume's life. It does not assess his works' enduring impact, even in the generation or two just after his death. Conversations, after all, die with the conversationalist. Taking Hume at his final word as someone devoted to *literary* fame[6] would have suggested a different perspective, one concerned to ask what of Hume is still read with profit today, and why.

Those seeking in Hume an exemplary citizen of Europe's republic of letters, determined to ask big questions without answering them, and priding himself on his style, his impartiality, and his skill at puncturing the excesses of dogma, can do no better than to appreciate the figure that emerges from this book: judicious, sociable, public-spirited, mostly harmless. Those inspired by Hume as a hero of the human intellect who is still considered a canonical author of political theory, a pioneer in political economy and social theory, and indeed, a great innovator in pure philosophy, will have to seek out one of the many future biographies that will no doubt be spurred by Hume's remarkable genius.

NOTES

1 Similarly, Harris portrays Hume as trying to "encourage 'the philosophical spirit'" in readers of his *History* by trying "to get him or her thinking in terms of the fundamental principles that underlay and animated the events portrayed in the narrative, and to encourage recognition of how finely balanced the arguments were in favour of, on the one hand, the partisans of liberty, and, on the other, the partisans of the crown" (340). Again, the purpose of getting people thinking about fundamental principles is to educate them *away* from seeing politics as something that such principles can clearly illuminate, much less guide.

2 Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture*. Harris cites this work globally but does not really take up its argument. On the contrary, on 193, he glosses Hume's "Sceptic" persona in the Essays—often, and not unreasonably, taken as a proxy for Hume himself—as aspiring to the "mortification of self-love and ambition." This is telling, since the passages Harris cites describe a project of inclining people towards social and away from sensual passions, but nowhere mention mortifying ambition—elsewhere praised by Hume as "greatness of mind"—much less the "love of literary fame" that Hume called his "ruling passion" ("My Own Life," in *Essays,* xl). Harris, at 459, chooses to efface this self-styled love of fame, stressing instead an earlier passage (xxxii–xxxiii) in which Hume names a "passion for literature" (not literary fame) as his ruling one. Harris's problem is that an intellectual who aspires to enduring fame must belief himself capable of a permanent contribution to human knowledge—as Hume, in fact, did.

3 See Sabl, *Hume's Politics*.

4 Without specifically defining what he means by constitutional questions, Harris' language repeatedly suggests (e.g. at 184, 250) that assessing constitutions means, more or less exclusively, assessing the nature and worth of different forms of government.

5 See Suber, *The Paradox of Self-Amendment*.

6 See above, note 2.

WORKS CITED

Harris, James A. *Hume: An Intellectual Biography.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Hicks, Philip. *Neoclassical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume.* New York: St. Martin's, 1996.

Hume, David. *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary.* Edited by Eugene Miller, revised ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987.

Hume, David. *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688.* 6 vols. Ed. William B. Todd. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983.

Sabl, Andrew. *Hume's Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Suber, Peter. *The Paradox of Self-Amendment: A Study of Law, Logic, Omnipotence, and Change.* New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 1990.