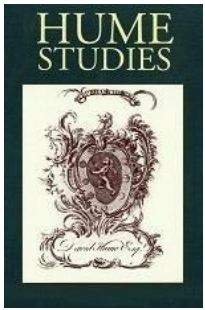

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I was a Leverhulme visiting fellow at the University of St Andrews in 2012–13 when James Harris was working on *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*. At the time, I expected his book to take decades to finish due to the daunting nature of the task. During those years there were periods when we sat daily discussing Hume at the National Library of Scotland and its near vicinity. As a result of those conversations, we also wrote and published an article about Hume in the Scottish context.[1] I look back to those days with warmth. I wanted to say this to point out that I am not impartial towards Harris, who I consider a friend, nevertheless, I am not responsible for what is advanced in James's book, and thus I can comment on it. James Harris succeeded in his undertaking much faster and better than what I expected—and my expectations were high.

The focus of this paper is on Hume's essays in a broad sense. The topics I will engage with include writing an intellectual biography, style, method, political perspectives, religion, and what I call "a defense of the unity thesis" in Hume, in contrast to Harris's argument that, surprisingly bluntly, claims that there is no real continuity throughout Hume's works.

What is it that you do when you write an intellectual biography? To me, it seems that the responsibility is overwhelming because you are not engaging in a regular scholarly debate, or what Quentin Skinner encourages us to do in historical research. The goal in Skinnerian intellectual history is not to put forward a "refereed perspective," but to find a *new* perspective which often means purposely arguing against what others have said. The objective is thus to formulate a novel, justified stance on some particular aspect of political thought. This approach is apt also due to the practical reasons. We do not have access to the past as such that would enable us to formulate an "objective" perspective on intellectual history qua facts.

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Hence, we are always engaged in a hermeneutic undertaking of a dialogue between previous interpretations and what we take away from our reading of the original sources, trying to find some new angle to a debate that is justified within some context of previous scholarship.[2] If we share this idea of what intellectual history is, then we are willing to allow that even going to the extremes of the argumentative style will advance our understanding of the past, as long as the perspective is contextualized. This, I believe, can be contrasted to some extent to what Harris does in his book, which is about carefully considering the different sides of previous arguments in scholarship and formulating a position based on it. In a sense, the question then is whether it is possible to act as a referee and write an intellectual biography that would be more objective than other studies of Hume's intellectual development, to be flagged out as the general point of reference.

To illustrate what I mean in Harris's case, let us consider the influence of Mandeville on Hume, a topic that I have been keenly interested in in my own past, and which Harris takes to be a relevant part of his story about Hume. When I attended my first Hume Society conference in 2005, I was afraid to defend the position of Hume as a Mandevillean thinker, because it was an unorthodox stance in the Hume Society at the time. Has this thinking about Mandeville's positive influence on Hume now become orthodox? I am not entirely sure about it. The reason why I am pointing this out is just to illustrate the nature of the game when one begins to write an intellectual biography—it is a tricky business to canonize different perspectives, because scholarship is consistently on the move. Whether we want it or not, this process of canonizing different perspectives, is also what separates a "regular" study of Hume's intellectual development from an intellectual biography.

Balancing Act

Over the years there have, of course, been several different accounts of David Hume's thinking. He has commonly been presented as the author of the *Treatise*. It is therefore understandable that much emphasis in contemporary Hume scholarship has been on metaphysics, as well as on epistemology. This overemphasis on merely one side of Hume needs to be challenged and alternated with a more balanced view of a person, who was in fact a multifaceted intellectual. This, I believe, is a view that Harris and I share, and it is the reason why he has written an intellectual biography of Hume.

What, in my opinion, should be understood is that the very need for a reassessment of Hume's thought is complex, and not a mere matter of antiquarian interest. The main reason why a new interpretation is needed is that a more balanced understanding of the coherent historical nature of Hume's thinking, and of his skepticism in general, should change the current view of Hume as a philosopher. Easier said than done. Thus, the motive for publishing yet another book on Hume is not simply a desire for historical accuracy in a biographical sense, nor the mere need to take his essays and the *History of England* more seriously. The claim made is that, hitherto, we have been unable to grasp the nature of his thinking and how his works are connected. Let us reflect on how Harris accomplishes this task.

What mattered a great deal to Hume was, of course, style. Being an essayist is inherently linked to the question of style—and I refer not only to what Harris states about style and Hume, but also to how Harris himself writes. Harris captures the relevance of style, perhaps better than anyone else hitherto, in the part of the book entitled "Achievement of independence." I believe that Hume himself would have been pleased with this interpretation of what it means to be a man of letters; a crucial topic to understand the relationship between the *Treatise* and the rest of Hume's writings. This is a brilliant feature of the book—how Harris is able to deal with Hume's intellectual enterprise in general—and I believe it is precisely what he writes about essays that captures this.

Another example of what Harris can do with his writing is the magnificent way in which he follows and makes sense of the political details of eighteenth-century Britain. I cannot recall reading such a clear-headed account of the political context of the Scottish Enlightenment. In Hume scholarship, the political developments of the eighteenth-century Britain and Scotland, starting with the union debates, continuing with local political upheavals, and advancing towards arguments about militia are too often left for those studying political theory, without an attempt to bridge Hume's philosophical views and political thought. In Harris's hands, the matter is somewhat different, for example a chapter entitled "Lessons of a Jacobite rebellion" continues one of the great virtues of Harris's book, linking different matters of real-life politics to Hume's works. The so-called newer essays from the later 1740s are covered very thoughtfully, and this, again, is a real pleasure to read. These are the parts that bring to mind the late Nick Phillipson's intellectual biography of Adam Smith, which is quite different in nature to Harris's Hume, but yet another fine example of the Scottish tradition of writing intellectual biographies on the main figures of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Yet, Harris is not really aiming to make overarching points about Hume, which is somewhat disappointing. He has chosen to treat Hume's essays, for example, by analysing them individually, often commenting on them one by one. These analyses are elegantly written, as Harris explores different political and other contexts, frequently in great detail. But perhaps the idea was to leave these larger arches of interpretation of Hume to his latest book that Harris has already been able to publish (and which I am yet to read)?[3]

Simultaneously, Harris also demonstrates that Hume was an experimentalist of borrowed methods, attempting explicitly to deploy a Newtonian experimental method to morals in his *Treatise*, and then switching to writing essays in the way adopted from Joseph Addison, for example. Aiming to do what Newton did in science, in morals, and then turning to writing *Spectator*-like essays, was of course explicitly underlined by Hume himself, but it has not often been realized that this constituted a pattern for this young man seeking fame. Harris is subtle in making these points, but at the same time, he captures the essence of Hume, what the person was about. He did his own thinking, but on many occasions, he borrowed the form from elsewhere. Regarding Hume the essayist, Harris apparently believes that Hume was really negotiating the middle way between extreme opposites. I would be inclined to claim that, at times, this was more of a rhetorical strategy: he put forward both sides of the argument, at least seemingly, but stood more firmly on one side rather than the other. This is not always

easy to detect, but still possible in my understanding. For example, if we read carefully what Hume actually says in his "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" and the later "Of Government" essays, it seems evident that Hume presents the virtues of both republic and monarchy, but he is really underlining the relevance of hierarchy in eighteenth-century political institutions related to matters such as politeness and sociability. The tendency in modern scholarship has of course been to understand Hume's perspective in the exact opposite way, thinking that what we have at hand is a eulogy of democracy with some added and outdated remarks about monarchy—this question of the moral consequences of politics for Hume is a mater far from settled in scholarship, and thus something that is difficult to be refereed in an intellectual biography.

As I have pointed out, refereeing historical authority is a tricky business. All the same, there really is no anatomy in history-writing, merely justified and plausible arguments that can build a case. Regarding Harris's strategy for dealing with Hume the essayist, his idea to start with the early memoranda is good. The downside of commenting on everything chronologically, however, is that he does not seize opportunities to make more substantial intellectual claims: he sets the context for many potential claims, but he does not set out the arguments as clearly as I, at least, was hoping for. The question of the relevance of hierarchy, evolution of civil societies, and civilized monarchy that I mentioned above, is one such matter.

Let us think about Harris's method of finding all possible relevant contexts for Hume's texts. There are numerous contexts, of which many are impossible to reconstruct, as Harris with his experience well knows. Thus, he ends up with a certain number that are open to interpretation. To me it seems that with just a little adjustment, one could also put forward an explicit interpretation in intellectual history in a Skinnerian sense, which is somewhat different from intellectual biography with this higher aim of "correctness." In the case of Hume the essayist, one possible interpretation of an intellectual historian, for example, would be to aim to understand Hume's emphasis on the already mentioned civilized monarchy by placing his early essays in their Court Whig context, and thus considering Hume as something of an anti-republican thinker, instead of someone trying to find a middle-ground on these issues. There would then be other material that one could connect to this claim in Hume's *Treatise*, a view also supported in other essays and his historical writings. This would be an argument in intellectual history, as opposed to intellectual biography (if there is such an invisible wall). In any case, the aim should be to say something more about continuity and unity in Hume. I do not really believe that Harris is putting forward this kind of interpretation about the nature of Hume's political thought in the book: he prefers to entangle all the contexts of Hume's different works and thus does not put forward any kind of "unity" thesis. I would like him to rethink this aspect to some extent, and offer more extended interpretations.

I would have also expected a stronger link between the discussion on trade and commerce, and the nature of political organisation. As it stands in Harris's interpretation, the discussion on forms of government, civilized monarchy, and *Political Discourses* are not really connected, which I think they should be. Harris's account of *Political Discourses,* although admirably covering different real-life political contexts, is somewhat technical and detailed. I

very much agree with Harris's understanding of the relevance of civilized monarchy in Hume's essays: its role is hard to exaggerate. It is more a question of connecting this to everything else that is going on.

Essays, History, and Religion

Another question about continuity in Hume that I would like to put forward here concerns the relationship between many of the essays and Hume as a historian. I would claim that Hume's writing of history begins with the essays. These are the kinds of transition at which Harris is usually very good, making his points without a further need to underline them. It is no accident that Hume read all of the ancient authors, quantifying and making a statistical interpretation about population, for example. This is very much backed up by what was going on at the University of Edinburgh at the time. Hume, in his reading of ancient texts and other histories in his own historical scholarship, is no different from what other historians did in this context. We do not have Hume's commonplace books on his own calculations, but he must have kept them. A significant piece of evidence in this respect is what the others were doing: in the ancient vs. moderns debate between Hume and Robert Wallace, Wallace had professor Charles Mackie on his side. At the University of Edinburgh, they were rechecking all the ancient works to confirm and question the calculations that Hume put forward in his essay on ancient populousness.

The population debate constitutes evidence that also sheds light on the relevance of methods that Hume was using in his scholarship. As noted above, many of his choices concerned the application of particular methods that others had developed relating to some specific subject matter like history or morals. These are exercises in a particular field, almost like brilliant student exercises in a classroom: one can witness Hume's engagement in this with respect to Newton, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Montesquieu, Wallace and Mackie, and Kames. As we very well know, the subject matter that Hume aimed to approach extended from human understanding to morals and politics and history. While this extensive scope of "science of man" is well known in Hume scholarship, this curiosity and the aspect of borrowing methods and tools from others while experimenting with ways how human sociability can be studied has not received much attention. This kind of experimentation is an aspect of continuity that could perhaps have been underlined more strongly in Harris's *Hume*.

With regard to the reading of Hume on religion in general, I agree with Harris that the atheist line in current Hume scholarship needs to be balanced. Nevertheless, I would have liked him to have made more of religion, in the sense that it is a political issue, very much a subject matter of the essays. Harris seems to me to be following Sandy Stewart's line to some extent in his discussion on experimental natural philosophy.[4] I was hoping to see more (in terms of pages) here, because the material is vast, and the possibilities to see more continuity in Hume rather obvious.

Hume was a system builder, who in the end, devoted a great deal of time and pages to discussing what could be categorized as natural history (muscles, Linnaean taxonomy) and

what could not (taste in art, religion), as well as the reasons for such categorization. *Dialogues concerning natural religion* deal with system building to the same extent as the *Treatise* and the essays. This desire for hierarchy and systematization is possibly also one core reason why he ended up making unfounded and unfortunate racist comments, which have been the focus of much recent debate. Again, instead of separate works, I see lines of unity that run through everything that Hume wrote.

Another small point that concerns me somewhat is the role given to Montesquieu in Harris's attempt to understand Hume's intellectual development leading up to the *History of England*. I understand that, of course, much of the discussion was shaped by reactions to Montesquieu, and his influence was strongly felt in Edinburgh at the time. I do not believe that Hume's sense of what can be achieved based on experimental science on human nature really changed in Hume's later career as much as Harris believes, and not because of Montesquieu.

Unity and Speculation

One main conclusion Harris reaches is that it is wrong to obsess about Hume being a thinker with a unified theory or plot that runs through all of his works. In his view, there is no "one Hume," and efforts to find unity in his works are in vain (cf. Harris, 12–13). Harris's method thus affects how he reads the relationship between the *Treatise* and the essays. I do not agree with Harris on this. I see no difficulty in emphasizing a continuum between Hume's *Treatise* and the essays, for example.

In fact, I would be very careful about disclaiming unity throughout Hume's works. At the same time, I agree with Harris's account that previous efforts to explain Hume's intellectual life through the scope of the first book of the Treatise, and to ascertain whether the rest of his works unleash a somewhat extended plan of his early philosophy, have been rather futile. Yet, to the best of my understanding, there is clear coherence and continuity in Hume, which is also apparent in Harris's book.

If one assumes that Hume was a profoundly "historical theorist," in whose thinking a particular conception of time and social change played a substantial role, one could say that his moral theory and moral philosophical perspective are largely historical, in the sense that there is continuity—not from philosophy to history, but from history to philosophy. When we aim to contextualise Hume's philosophical works as part of his overall project, there is room for reinterpretation. Consequently, if one were to take a different approach, not the normal path from philosophy to history and letters, but vice versa, one might detect the strong continuity in his thinking.

The implication here is that there is more stability in Hume's *Treatise*, essays and historical work than is displayed among natural law thinkers, for example, who also wrote on philosophy and history (such as Hobbes and Pufendorf). Earlier, history was written with the didactic purpose of learning about society. That is to say that one was able to pick and choose elements of history from different times and places. For Hume, the historical horizon was more modern, in the sense that Reinhart Koselleck has taught us.[5] The implications on

developing an idea of evolution of sociability ranging from principles of human understanding to political organization that includes a perspective of history was very different from Hobbes and Locke. This is poorly understood in Hume scholarship in general. It is an aspect that needs to be brought into all current discussions on Hume and history, especially with regard to the question of government, authority, and opinion. But in order to do this, we need to use our scholarly imagination to cross a few bridges for which we have no direct textual evidence as such.

Harris follows the Hume scholarship line of non-speculation on issues for which there is no concrete evidence. However, in all honesty, Harris also enjoys speculating about what Hume did with his life. This is a biographical interest. For example, speculation about Hume's desire to understand the world and growing up on a farm is, of course, biographical rather than intellectual setting for the book. I would also call Harris's reading of the *Letter from a Gentleman*, and the relationship between Coutts, Kames, and Wishart surprisingly speculative given the context. My point is that there is nothing wrong with this, because it is more difficult than one might think to separate the two and not to weigh what might have been the case.

Conclusion

We are very fortunate that James Harris has devoted so much of his career thinking about Hume's intellectual development. If we focus on Hume's essays, which was my main aim, what Harris has achieved is to make a substantial contribution to our current understanding of Hume as an essayist. Through Harris's hands, Hume the man of letters becomes alive, and it is easy to understand the relevance of style, method, different political debates, and crucially, religion in Hume's intellectual development. I have made comments about the difficulty of writing a balanced intellectual biography, and what it entails. Yet, from the perspective of Hume scholarship, a general intellectual biography was certainly needed to complement Mossner et al.[6] It is an incredible achievement by James Harris to be the first to accomplish this, and to put, for example, Hume's essays in their overall intellectual context that includes a perspective of Hume on human understanding. Naturally, there is no systematic plot followed by Hume in all of his intellectual life, yet there is much coherence in the undertaking of science of man, and the connections between his different works need to also be teased out.

NOTES

1 Harris and Tolonen. "Hume In and Out of Scottish Context."

2 Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," 8–26.

3 Harris, *Hume: A Very Short Introduction.*

4 Stewart, "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711–1752."

5 Koselleck, *Futures Past.*

6 Mossner, *Life of Hume*; Norton, "An Introduction to Hume's Thought"; Emerson 'The "Affair" at Edinburgh and the "Project" at Glasgow; Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics.*

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