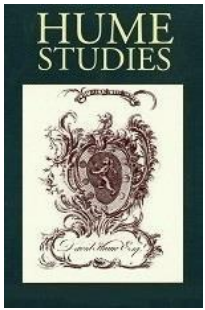

James A. Harris

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I am very grateful to Catherine Jones, Andrew Sabl, and Mikko Tolonen for taking the trouble to read my book *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* so carefully, and for responding to it so thoughtfully and constructively. I thank the editors of *Hume Studies* for the honour of having the book discussed in the journal that matters most to any Hume scholar. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of the 2017 Hume Society Conference in Providence, and especially Aaron Garrett and André Willis, for inviting me to take part in a discussion of the book there. My critics on that occasion were James Moore and Dario Perinetti, both of whom gave me much to think about. Before I begin my responses to Jones, Sabl, and Tolonen, I feel that I need to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that what is at issue here is a book that was published in 2015. I finished work on it, in fact, in the autumn of 2014. As I write, that is almost seven years ago, and since then I have continued to think about the character and shape of Hume's intellectual development. Indeed, I have in the meantime written another book about Hume.[1] This new book is much shorter. It does not differ from the earlier book in any very significant way, but there are nevertheless some things that I have changed my mind about, and so it is possible that my replies to my critics here say more about my current views than about the views I held as I wrote the book under discussion. I hope that this does not make my critics feel that I am guilty of moving the goal-posts while the game is still being played.

Reply to Jones

One of the things that I was most interested in as I wrote *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* was how to characterize what might be termed Hume's literary persona. I wanted to find a

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way of describing what, in some languages, would be called his *authorship*, the nature of his ambition as a writer, how he addressed his readers, the voice he adopted in his appeal to their attention.[2] I was sure that a clear and categorical distinction needed to be made between Hume's literary persona and the characteristic ambitions, and mode of address, of the Anglophone philosopher of today. Of course, Hume thought of himself as philosopher, and often engaged with his reader as a philosopher, but, it seemed—and still seems—to me, it would be a serious mistake to assume without reflection that the kind of thing Hume understood philosophy to be was the same as the kind of thing we understand philosophy to be now. My suggestion, at any rate, was that "philosophy" was for Hume more a style of thought, and of writing, than a discrete subject matter, and that the best way to understand his project as a writer is to see him as taking up the persona of the "man of letters" and attempting to give that persona a distinctively *philosophical* inflection. I am very glad that Catherine Jones accepts this as a fruitful way of characterizing Hume's authorship. What she makes clear in her comments is that there is much more to say than I said in the book about the history of the man of letters, and much more to say also about Hume's particular version of this literary persona.

I suggest in my book that, as a way of bringing Hume's literary ambitions into clearer focus, it is helpful to compare and contrast them with his almost exact contemporary Samuel Johnson. Both sought a kind of independence and autonomy that it had not been possible for authors in English to achieve before the eighteenth century—though both had before them the example of Alexander Pope, and the way he dramatically altered the balance of power between author and bookseller. Money was, of course, the key to independence, but money mattered in very different ways to Hume and Johnson, and Jones is quite right to pick me up for suggesting in a note that money mattered more to the Scot than to the Englishman. That claim is at odds with what I remark on elsewhere, the fact that financial support from his family meant Hume did not, as Johnson did, need to write in order to eat. Hume's path to independence as a man of letters was considerably smoother and more agreeable than Johnson's. From the start—or, almost from the start, once he had put the crisis of the late 1720s and early 1730s behind him—Hume had a sense of security, a sense of himself and of his place in the world, that Johnson, with his fits of anger and his bouts of depression, seems always to have lacked.

Thomas Carlyle wrote about this difference in *The Edinburgh Review* with compassionate exactness in a passage that I am glad to have the excuse to quote here:

> Greater contrast, in all things, between two great men, could not be. Hume, well-born, competently provided for, whole in body and mind, of his own determination forces a way into Literature: Johnson, poor, moonstruck, diseased, forlorn, is forced into it "with the bayonet of necessity at his back." And what a part did they severally play there! As Johnson became the father of all succeeding Tories; so was Hume the father of all succeeding Whigs, for his own Jacobitism was but an accident, as worthy to be named Prejudice as any of Johnson's. Again, if Johnson's culture was exclusively English; Hume's, in Scotland, became European;—for which reason too we find his influence spread deeply over all quarters of Europe, traceably deeply in

> all speculation, French, German, as well as domestic; while Johnson's name, out of England, is hardly anywhere to be met with. . . . Both were, by principle and habit, Stoics: yet Johnson with the greater merit, for he alone had very much to triumph over; farther, he alone ennobled his Stoicism into Devotion. To Johnson Life was as a Prison, to be endured with heroic faith: to Hume it was little more than a foolish Bartholomew-Fair Show-booth, with the foolish crowdings and elbowings of which it was not worth to while to quarrel; the whole would break up, and be at liberty, *so soon*.[3]

There is much to quibble with here, but when it comes to the larger issue, Carlyle seems to me exactly right. As Jones notes, Carlyle's lecture on "The Hero as Man of Letters" instances Johnson, along with Burns and Rousseau, as an example of the man of letters as "heroic soul," devoted, "in his squalid garret, in his rusty coat," to revealing quasi-religious truths to which his age has made itself dead. This particular kind of hero "is he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary [and] Trivial."[4] Hume is not mentioned in his lecture, but he is present in it all the same, as an exponent of the prevailing skepticism that put men like Johnson, Burns, and Rousseau so fatally at odds with their time. In Carlyle's terms, Hume was in tune with his age in a way that Johnson was not. This is an exaggeration, maybe, but it is no more an exaggeration than Ernest Mossner's picture of Hume as prophet almost entirely denied honour in his own country.

As foreign as skepticism to Carlyle's heroic man of letters is the irony that inevitably goes along with skepticism. The man of letters as hero struggles to excavate deep truths in order to remind his contemporaries of what they need to know about human existence. The skeptic holds that such truths are beyond our grasp, and that even the most tentative assertion is shadowed by uncertainty, so that it is never quite clear exactly what it is that one is entitled to mean, and never quite clear how to understand others. It is natural for the skeptic to try on different voices, and to set personae against each other, in the hope that the presentation of discord and disagreement will ensure that nothing is taken as a pretention to certainty. Hence, I think, Hume's deployments of the dialogue form, and the way—to which I return below—he *staged* arguments instead of trying to conclude them. Jones echoes a frustration expressed by Tim Stuart-Buttle in his review of my book, a frustration at my decision to concentrate on the ideas rather than the man, and at my consequent neglect of the tension between Hume's detached literary persona and the passionate and opinionated character occasionally seen in his letters.[5] The sense that I myself got as I worked with Hume's letters was that they were just as much acts of authorship as his books. I did not feel that they told me very much at all, if anything, about the opinions and sentiments of the "real" Hume. They seemed to me to be very often, if not always, exercises in personification, full of ironies that I was in no position to gauge, and jokes that I only occasionally understood.

Reply to Sabl

"The Eighteenth was a *Sceptical* Century," Carlyle claimed, and, he continued, in the word "scepticism" "there is a whole Pandora's Box of miseries. Scepticism means not intellectual Doubt alone, but moral Doubt; all sorts of infidelity, insincerity, spiritual paralysis."[6] I do not think that skepticism was for Hume the kind of existential malaise that it was not only for Carlyle, but for many others in the nineteenth century, but I do think, along of course with many who have written on Hume, that an account of his skepticism is an essential part of any attempt to characterise Hume's cast of mind.[7] In the first instance, it seemed to me as I wrote *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, skepticism was for Hume a certain attitude towards intellectual endeavour. It expressed itself in what might possibly have been a compulsion to expose fallacies and contradictions in the arguments of everyone and anyone, be they antiquarians, university professors, religious apologists, or political pamphleteers. In many of his writings, as I read them, Hume seems to have been concerned more with bringing puzzles and problems to the reader's attention than with offering the reader a decisive argument in favour of this or that position on the matter at hand. This is especially clear, I think, in the way in which Hume adopted and adapted the essay form. Hume's essays very often stage a confrontation between two well established moral or political contraries, with the aim of getting the reader to think beyond those contraries, and to see the issue in a new light. They seldom, if ever, purport to solve a problem so that the reader need think about it no longer. In his writings on the human understanding, Hume's interest is in the tools we have at our disposal in order to answer the questions we find ourselves wanting to ask about ourselves and the world around us, and what he wants to show us is how ill-suited those tools are to providing us with certainty about anything. Right at the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, and possibly also in part 12 of the *Dialogues*, Hume turns skepticism back on itself. Hume's skepticism is not the end of thought, but the impetus for thought to continue.

Andrew Sabl evinces a certain disappointment, both at my interest in Hume as man of letters, and at my determination to show skepticism to be at the heart of Hume's particular way of being a man of letters. Sabl sees me as neglecting Hume's effort to establish durable truths, particularly in what is now called political science. In this connection, it seems to me that there is a distinction to be drawn between what a present-day political scientist, or indeed a present-day philosopher, can extract from Hume's works for the purposes of advancing present-day debates, and what Hume's intentions were as he wrote those works. I read Sabl's book *Hume's Politics* with great pleasure and profit.[8] It is one of the best accounts I know of what a genuinely Humean theory of political authority, and political obligation, looks like.[9] But I do not believe that Sabl's account of what can be learned from Hume, and from *The History of England* in particular, tells us very much about what Hume took himself to be doing. Reading against the grain, so to speak, is often a fruitful way to read. But it is one way of reading among others, and, for the purposes of *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, I was reading Hume in a different way. There is good evidence, it seems to me, that Hume himself was skeptical about the possibility of a science of politics. Yes, he wrote an essay with the title "That

Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," but he himself wrote little that advertised itself as proof "that politics admit of general truths, which are invariable by the humour either of subject of sovereign."[10] In another essay, he remarked that he was "apt . . . to entertain a suspicion, that the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity."[11] It is significant, I think, that Hume generally wrote about politics using the essay form. It is also significant that his one longform work on political subjects was a narrative history, and not an "account of the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in different ages and periods of society" of the kind promised by Adam Smith at the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.[12]

This is not to deny that Sabl disagrees with me about how to interpret Hume's intentions in his—Hume's—treatment of specific topics and events. Actually, I am not sure that we are as far apart about, for instance, Magna Carta as he suggests in his comments. My view—certainly my view now—is that while Hume was skeptical of the short-term consequences of what happened at Runnymede in 1215, he did not deny that, in the end, the principle that the crown is bound by laws was hugely significant in English history. His point was merely that it took a very long time for what was in the first instance a tactical victory for the barons to turn into something of advantage to the people as a whole. On the other hand, it might be that Sabl and I do disagree at quite a fundamental level about Hume's attitude to the revolution of 1688–89. I just do not recognise Hume in Sabl's distinctly Burkean claim that the great achievement of that revolution was to have settled the principle of hereditary power on a firmer footing. It could not be clearer, it seems to me, that what Hume saw in the replacement of James II with William and Mary was the inauguration of a new era in English, and eventually British, politics. (I do not see that to interpret Hume this way must be to read him as claiming that politics is wholly up to us in the present.) However, the more important point here has to do with what I take to be the remit of an intellectual biographer. I do not think that it is the job of someone writing an intellectual biography to make judgments about the nature of their subject's enduring impact on the world of letters. Certainly, I took myself not to be obliged to spell out what in Hume is still read with profit, and why. It is probably true that Hume wrote in order to be read not only by his contemporaries, but also by posterity. But is it clear that we remember him for things he wanted to be remembered for? Can we be sure that we profit from his writings in ways he intended? My guess is that he would be surprised, and probably disappointed, to learn what philosophers and others have, and have not, taken from his works over the past 250 years.

Reply to Tolonen

Mikko Tolonen, too, displays a measure of frustration at the way I treat Hume's interventions in the intellectual disputes of his day. He suggests that Hume's claim, in many of his writings but especially in his essays, to be promoting compromise and moderation should not always be taken seriously. Hume had definite views, Tolonen suggests, and this can be seen in his writing if one reads carefully enough. For instance, there is, according to Tolonen, a discernible

anti-republicanism in Hume's political thought. Now, the first thing to note here is that this claim is at odds with Sabl's claim that Hume set out to establish a system of political science. When Hume speaks in the voice of someone concerned to show that politics may be reduced to a science, he limits himself to the claim that general truths are more easily established with respect to republican forms of government than with respect to monarchies. Secondly, though, there is the question of what the dialectical situation was in British political argument in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Is it true to say that to take up at least some of the language of the Court Whigs, and also to argue that liberty can be as real under absolute monarchy as under any other form of government, was, in this time and place, implicitly to take a stand against *republicanism*? Answering that kind of question is precisely the kind of thing that I *do* think is part of the remit of the intellectual biographer. One way—perhaps the only way—to get a sense of what Hume's intentions might have been is to pay attention to the state of play, at this time, in the debates that Hume engaged with. Then one can ask what, given that the intellectual climate was like *that*, a text like *this* might have been meant to do. Influential work on eighteenth-century British political thought by John Pocock and others has focused on the continuing importance of the language of neo-Machiavellianism, but I am—now, at any rate—unconvinced that this entails that the great question of the age was between republicanism and anti-republicanism. In fact, it seems to me, what to a very significant extent continued to structure political argument was a dispute between those, broadly speaking, sympathetic to the ideas of Locke, and those, equally broadly speaking, sympathetic to the ideas of Sir Robert Filmer. Both positions were "anti-republican." How Hume negotiated a way between these opposites has yet to be properly examined.[13]

Another important issue raised by Tolonen concerns Hume's intellectual engagement with Montesquieu. Tolonen suggests, not unjustly, that I give the impression that whereas—as no one has made clearer than Tolonen himself—Mandeville was Hume's chief intellectual companion in the early stages of Hume's intellectual development, it was Montesquieu who played this role later on. There was, to be sure, more to say about Hume and Montesquieu than I said in *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, and no doubt what I did say there was unsatisfactory because too brief. I hope to have made it clear, though, that in the case of neither Mandeville, nor Montesquieu was significant impact upon Hume's thinking the same thing as "influence." In both cases, there was important disagreement, as well as important agreement, and it may be that the right thing to say is that the role these writers played for Hume was that of exemplars of the right way, in general, to think about moral and political subjects. Both, from Hume's point of view, struck the right tone, both were refreshingly free of illusion, neither was disposed to blink in the face of the realities of moral and political life. It is a striking fact that, as we can tell from the 1741 and 1742 volumes of *Essays, Moral and Political*, Hume was clearly thinking about politics in what we might call a "Montesquieuian" way *before* he read *De l'Esprit des Lois*. That might be because of what he had been able to glean from Montesquieu's early work. But it might equally be just a coincidence, a matter of two men developing roughly the same cast of mind, at roughly the same time. (Hume was not the only Scot of his time who in the early and mid 1740s thought himself into an intellectual position that anticipated

Montesquieu: Kames was another, and it may be that there is much more to say about the Hume-Kames relationship than I was able to say in my book.) The right thing to say might be that Montesquieu, like Mandeville, gave Hume the confidence fully to develop thoughts that he was already having. In any case, I remain committed to Montesquieu's importance to Hume, and I am keen to see what Tolonen will say on this matter in his own future work.[14]

A more fundamental dissatisfaction expressed by Tolonen concerns my reluctance to entertain the idea that there are substantial connections to be drawn between Hume's various works. As I explain in the introduction to my book, my approach to Hume's intellectual development took its point of departure from a dissatisfaction with the idea that everything that Hume wrote was, in some sense or other, a part of the science of man announced at the beginning of the *Treatise*. One way of putting what is wrong with this is approach is that it makes life too easy for the history of philosophy as currently practised in the Anglophone world. It means that a text like the *History of England* can be written about in almost complete ignorance of an extremely complex context provided by the large number of other histories of England published in the decades before Hume began his own historical work. As I have indicated above, knowledge of that kind of context seemed to me to be essential to the task of figuring of what Hume's intentions might have been. Of course, it was the same man who wrote the *Treatise*, the *Essays*, the *History*, and so on, and of course he did not wipe his mind clean of all that he had previously written when he began a new work. But, still, it does not seem to me that it helps very much, in approaching the *Essays* or the *History*, to know that the person who wrote those texts also wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*. I have the sense that Hume was a fox, not a hedgehog. His was a restless mind that wanted to move on to new things, not a mind that returned again and again to the same ideas and debates. Tolonen asserts that Hume was a system builder. My response to that is that I just do not see any evidence for it, not in anything that Hume himself said after 1739, nor in the shape of his *oeuvre*. Smith was a system builder. So, perhaps, was Thomas Reid. But I do not think Hume was, any more than Johnson was, or Voltaire.

Conclusion

I want to add only that I do not regard my book as in any sense the last word about Hume's intellectual biography. It could not but be a speculative piece of work, because, as I emphasise in the book itself, there is so little surviving evidence for an intellectual biographer to work with. We have no diaries, almost nothing in the way of notebooks, and, comparatively, a very small number of letters. We have Hume's works themselves, but Hume was generally reticent when it came to programmatic statements about what he thought of himself as doing in those works. The *History of England* had no preface or introduction. "Of Essay Writing" was withdrawn in 1742, never to be published again. Section 1 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* is, to say the least, difficult to interpret. So, there is ample room for reconstructions of Hume's intentions, and of the development of his career as an author, very different to mine. There is also, surely, more to discover about every phase of Hume's life. Hard work in

libraries and archives has the potential radically to change our understanding of what Hume was about as a philosopher and as a historian.[15] I look forward to reading new intellectual biographies of Hume in the years to come.

NOTES

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

2 I take this understanding of the word "authorship" from Clare Carlisle's biography of Kierkegaard, *Philosopher of the Heart*.

3 Carlyle, "Boswell's Life of Johnson," 111.

4 Carlyle, *Selected Writings*, 235–36.

5 Stuart Buttle provides his own interpretation of aspects of Hume's intellectual biography in his deeply interesting book *From Moral Theology to Moral Philosophy: Cicero and Visions of Humanity from Locke to Hume*.

6 Carlyle, *Selected Writings*, 250.

7 For a powerful interpretation of Hume's skepticism, published too late for me to make use of it in *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, see Ainslie, *Hume's True Scepticism*.

8 See also Spencer, "Hume's Magna Charta and Sabl's Fundamental Constitutional Conventions," and Sabl's "Reply to my Critics."

9 Sabl's book is profitably read together with Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind*.

10 Hume, *Essays and Treatises*, I: 17.

11 Hume, *Essays and Treatises*, I: 91.

12 Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, II: 399.

13 For a preliminary survey of the territory, see Harris, "Of the Origin of Government."

14 All future work on Hume's engagement with Montesquieu will need to take account of Pye, "Histories of Liberty in Scottish Thought."

15 For one example of what such work can achieve, see Perinetti, "Hume at La Flèche." New studies of Hume's context will also alter our understanding of aspects of Hume's thought: see, for instance, Silvia Sebastiani's current work on the Scottish science of man and its implications for the theorization of racial difference, in, e.g., Sebastiani, "Monboddo's 'ugly tail.'"

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