

The Essential  
**DAVID HUME**



by James R. Otteson

FRASER  
INSTITUTE



# The Essential David Hume

*by James R. Otteson*

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*To Max Hocutt  
Teacher, mentor, great-souled friend*

# Preface, Acknowledgments, and Note on Texts Used

## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is part of the Fraser Institute's *Essential Scholars* series, each volume of which is intended to present the ten (or so) main things everyone should know about a major figure in the history of both economics and moral philosophy. There are many great economists, and many great philosophers, but few great philosophical economists or economic philosophers. That is, few of the great economists or philosophers made significant contributions not only to their own discipline but to the other as well. There are thus few what we might call great "political economists," the term that eighteenth-century luminaries like Adam Smith and David Hume used to describe their investigations into what a virtuous or moral life is and how we might organize our public social institutions to enable, encourage, and reward such a life.

Given how important these figures were, however, and how relevant they remain to today's political-economic concerns, the Fraser Institute's series is most welcome. I am honoured to have already contributed to it with my *The Essential Adam Smith* (2018), and I am further honoured to be contributing the current volume on David Hume. I thank the Fraser Institute, and in particular Jason Clemens, for spearheading the effort. I also thank Aeon Skoble, editor of the series, for inviting me to write this volume.

The series is funded in part by the Templeton Foundation. In 2007, my book *Actual Ethics* (2006) won the Templeton Enterprise Award. I thank the Templeton Foundation for their past and, now, continuing support.

I express heartfelt thanks to Max Hocutt, who helped me understand the depth and importance of Hume's thought, and who has taught me so much

else besides. I dedicate this book to him. Thanks also goes to Maria Pia Paganelli for her advice on the organization and construction of this volume. I also thank an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft for numerous helpful suggestions. Of course, none of them is responsible for any remaining errors; only I am.

I also thank the Eudaimonia Institute at Wake Forest University, as well as its staff, visitors, and research associates, for providing me an outstanding environment in which to work.

Finally, I thank my family for their unflagging love and support. My beloved Katharine, Victoria, James, Joseph, and George are in this, as in everything else, my *sine qua non*.

### Note on texts used

Hume himself asked that subsequent readers pay attention only to the revisions of his *Treatise of Human Nature* that Hume published as shortened essays under the titles of *An Enquiry concerning Human Nature* and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. In the “Advertisement” to the posthumously published 1777 collection of his essays, which contained both *Enquiries*, Hume wrote: “Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles” (E1: 2).<sup>1</sup> Like many others, I regard Hume’s *Treatise* as one of the great works in the history of philosophy. Nevertheless, out of respect for Hume’s wishes, in the chapters that follow I give more attention to the *Enquiries* than to the *Treatise*.

Below is a list of abbreviations I use when I refer to Hume’s texts (page numbers in the text refer to these editions). Where possible, I also use a standardized notation so that readers can find the relevant passages in other editions of Hume’s works: “T 2.3.4: 266” means “Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, section 3, paragraph 4, on p. 266 of the edition cited [below].”

D: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. 1998. Richard H. Popkin (ed.) Hackett.

E1: *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748). *David Hume: Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*. 1975. Reprinted from the 1777 edition

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1 For an explanation of this abbreviation, see below.



- with Introduction and Analytical Index by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd. ed. with text rev. and notes by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford University Press.
- E2: *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (1751). David Hume: Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals.* 1975. Reprinted from the 1777 edition with Introduction and Analytical Index by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd. ed. with text rev. and notes by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford University Press.
- EMPL: *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary (1777). David Hume: Essays Moral, Political, and Literary.* 1985. Eugene F. Miller (ed.) Liberty Fund.
- HL1: *The Letters of David Hume, Volume I: 1727–1765.* 1932. J.Y.T. Grieg (ed.) Oxford University Press.
- HL2: *The Letters of David Hume, Volume II: 1766–1776.* 1932. J.Y.T. Grieg (ed.) Oxford University Press.
- T: *Treatise of Human Nature (1739–40). David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature.* 2000. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.) Oxford University Press.



## Chapter 1

# Who was David Hume?

### Introduction

If one were to poll academic philosophers today and ask which philosopher from the past they would most like to share a meal with, my guess is that the winner would be David Hume (1711–1776). Perhaps more than any other great philosopher in history, Hume had a combination of brilliance and ebullience, of wit and wisdom and of affability and conviviality, that would make him a most excellent conversational companion. There might be other figures who exceeded him in brilliance—though not many—and there are certainly others who have exceeded him in influence; but perhaps more than any others Hume seemed to be the kind of person who would have been both an intellectual and a social joy to be with. Yet, Hume’s life, in many of its particulars and in many ways overall, was tragic: he met with disappointment after disappointment; though loved by many he was (or at least his ideas were) reviled by even more; and though he had some stalwart friends, perhaps his single best friend, Adam Smith (1723–1790), often disappointed him as well. Yet in all this Hume apparently maintained his cheerfulness, somehow managing to remain a person of good will, charity, and generosity despite the many reasons he had to sour on his life, on his times, and even on his friends.

Hume thus lived a life that was at once inspiring and heartbreaking. He was the preeminent philosopher in what is now called the Scottish Enlightenment, a time that was “crowded with genius”<sup>2</sup> and in a place regarded as the rebirth of the golden era of Athens. His writing displayed an astonishing range, addressing everything from metaphysics to politics, and in subject after subject he produced fresh, novel, and brilliant insights.

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2 See Buchan, 2003.

Though in his own words it “fell *dead-born from the press*,”<sup>3</sup> Hume wrote, in his late twenties, what is now considered one of the great texts in Western philosophy, his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), which offered an account of human psychology, of causation and the limits of human knowledge, and of the origins and nature of moral judgments. He went on to write shorter essays on, and produce penetrating insights about, topics from political economy like debt, interest, trade, and the origins and limits of political obedience; to fine arts and “the standard of taste”; to divorce, the immortality of the soul, and suicide; and much else besides. He also wrote *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), offering a genealogical account of religious belief that seemed to sever it from connections to transcendence or the divine, and he wrote a magisterial, multivolume *History of England* (1754–62). Hume managed to see well beyond his age and, time again, as we shall see, he got things right.

Hume is thus a towering and intriguing figure in the history of philosophy, which justifies placing him in the pantheon of great philosophers. Indeed, he should be on any list of the ten greatest philosophers of all time, and arguably the single greatest English-speaking philosopher. He was also one of the greatest English prose writers of all time, despite the fact that, as he himself confessed, his Scots dialect and accent were sources of embarrassment for him.<sup>4</sup> But it was his groundbreaking insights and advances in political economy that warrant his place in the Fraser Institute’s *Essential Scholars* series.

It would be impossible in one volume to give due expression to, or even address, all of Hume’s thought. For that reason, *The Essential David Hume* will focus on a handful of his central contributions with an emphasis on political economy, in particular his conception and defense of commercial society and of the role government should play in protecting it. Hume had a peculiar ability to write with clarity and style, and to present sophisticated and subtle arguments with ease, precision, and even humor. To understand his arguments and to appreciate the force and vitality of his writing, there is no substitute for reading his work itself. Any attempt at recreating or reconstructing his work will pale by comparison. Nonetheless, I will do my best to summarize and represent his work and contributions accurately, giving an account of their substance and

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3 Here and throughout, direct quotations are reprinted exactly as they appear in the original.

4 Hume wrote to the English politician John Wilkes in 1754 that he regarded his own Scottish accent to be “totally desperate and irreclaimable” (HL1: 205).

import as clearly and faithfully as I can. My goal will be to recount Hume’s life and work in a way that conveys their depth and importance, and that pays due respect to one of philosophy’s profoundest geniuses and one of humanity’s greatest souls.

## The great David Hume

David Hume was born in 1711 in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the third and final child of Joseph and Katherine Home. (Hume changed the spelling of his last name from “Home” to “Hume” in 1734 so that its spelling matched its pronunciation.) His father died when Hume was only two years old, and Hume was raised by his mother, Katherine, who never remarried. Katherine was the daughter of Sir David Falconer, a prominent judge in Scotland, and was herself an advocate (or lawyer). It was perhaps understandable, then, that Hume’s mother expected him to follow a similar path and also become an advocate.

Hume matriculated at the University of Edinburgh at the tender age of 10, pursuing the then-standard course of study of Greek, Latin, metaphysics, and “natural philosophy” or natural science. He spent four years at the University of Edinburgh, though he never received a degree (a practice not uncommon at the time). He then spent the next eight years, or until he was 22, engaged in independent study. He read widely in history, literature, philosophy, law, and theology, a course of study that would have prepared him well for law or ministry—though neither would turn out to interest him. Hume’s family was Presbyterian, and Hume himself seems to have been raised as a pious Christian. During Hume’s teenage years, however, he grew increasingly skeptical about the religious beliefs his family and most of those around him held. In any case, as Hume himself reported, he “found an insurmountable aversion to every thing but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning” (EMPL: xxxiii).

Although he read the leading religious and theological thinkers of his day, Hume was apparently far more impressed by Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and the feat Newton had accomplished by accounting for disparate observations—the motion of things on earth and in the heavens—with a few relatively simple principles that were arrived at empirically and inductively and that did not rely on theological, metaphysical, or other *a priori* principles (that is, principles based on pure reason, not on experience or observation). This led Hume to

wonder whether a similar procedure could be applied to human nature and the human condition: could we do for the study of human behaviour what Newton did for the behaviour of inanimate objects?

Hume wanted to devote himself to reading and writing literature and philosophy. His resources were “very slender” (EMPL: xxxiii), however, and so he was forced by his circumstances to seek other means to support himself. In 1734, at the age of 23, he traveled to Bristol to try his hand at being a merchant. When he discovered “that scene totally unsuitable” to him (EMPL: xxxiii), he traveled to France and resolved to live as frugally as possible so that he could maintain his independence and dedicate his life to “the improvement of my talents in literature” (EMPL: xxxiv). It was during his time in France that he began work on what would become his first major project, *The Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published in two parts in 1739 and in 1740.

The public reception of Hume’s *Treatise* was disheartening. Its sales were meager, and its few reviewers complained that it was too long and difficult to understand. This was one of the first great disappointments in Hume’s life. As he himself would write later, “Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots” (EMPL: xxxiv). It would have been one thing for the book’s arguments to be sharply criticized, something that would have been unsurprising since the book’s arguments led in new and even radical directions; but to be largely ignored and greeted with little more than a shrug of the shoulders was a great blow to the young Hume. Despite the fact that no less a figure than Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) would later report that it was Hume who woke Kant from his “dogmatic slumber” and launched him on the trajectory to publish his groundbreaking three *Critiques*,<sup>5</sup> it was not until the twentieth century that Hume’s *Treatise* began to rise in the esteem of philosophers. It is now widely regarded as one of the great works in the history of philosophy, despite having been written by a man only in his twenties and with no college degree.

The tepid response to Hume’s *Treatise* led him to try his hand at writing shorter works. He revised and shortened the three major parts of his *Treatise*

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5 These would be Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 1781 [1965], 1788 [1956], and 1790 [1787], respectively).

into *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1748 and corresponding to book I of the *Treatise*; *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, first published in 1751 and corresponding to book III of the *Treatise*; and *Dissertation on the Passions*, first published in 1757 and corresponding to book II of the *Treatise*. In the meantime, he began publishing short essays on a wide range of subjects. The first volume of his essays he published under the title of *Essays Moral and Political* in 1741. He went on to publish several subsequent editions of his *Essays*, each time adding more essays.<sup>6</sup>

His essays enjoyed much wider readership than did his *Treatise*, and his notoriety and reputation were now growing. When the position of Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh became available in 1744–45, the 33-year-old Hume sought it out. He was denied the position, however, on the grounds that he was a “sceptic.” Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), who was Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow and had been Adam Smith’s teacher, intervened against Hume because he considered skepticism to be tantamount to atheism, which, Hutcheson believed, rendered one unfit for a professorship in moral philosophy. Later, when Adam Smith left his position as Chair of Logic at the University of Glasgow in 1751 to take up the position of Chair of Moral Philosophy at the same institution, this left the former position open, and Hume was again interested. Unfortunately, the “violent and solemn remonstrances of the clergy” prevented Hume from receiving the position (see HL1: 164), and so he was for a second (and final) time disappointed not to receive a professorship for which he was, by any objective standard, arguably the most qualified person in Scotland.

In 1752, the position of librarian at the Faculty of Advocates (or library for lawyers) became vacant, and, despite “the violent cry of Deism, atheism, and scepticism” (HL1: 165) raised against him, Hume was elected to the position. This position afforded Hume a small income, but, more importantly, it gave him access to a large library of books and the time to read and write. Hume went on to write several notable works, including *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) and his multivolume *History of England* (1754–62). The latter sold well enough

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6 See the editor’s Foreword to EMPL for specifics on publication dates and the essays contained in each edition.

to finally put him at financial ease and gained him both supporters and critics on both sides of the Channel.

Hume never married or had children, both of which were further causes of disappointment in his life. He apparently fell in love with a Parisienne named Comtesse de Boufflers during the time he spent in France in the mid-1760s, but she was already married (and, apparently, the mistress of yet another man) (see Rasmussen, 2017: chap. 6). Although they had a close friendship that lasted many years, including after Hume left France and returned to Scotland, they thus could never marry. Hume spent his final years in Edinburgh writing, meeting with friends, and increasingly suffering from dysentery. Hume died on August 25, 1776 in his house on St. David Street, Edinburgh, at the age of 65. He lived long enough to have read Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which had been published in March of that year, and to send Smith remarkable praise for the work; and he lived long enough to have suffered yet one more grave disappointment, this time at the hands of perhaps his best friend, none other than Adam Smith himself (see chapter 8).

After Hume's death, Smith was moved to write: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit" (Smith, 1987: 221). Given Hume's by-then confirmed status as a skeptic and possibly an atheist, such a claim was bound to cause a stir—and Smith did indeed face criticism for having written it. Yet Smith called Hume a "never to be forgotten friend"; Smith continued that regarding Hume's "philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously, every one approving or condemning them, according as they happen to coincide or disagree with his own," yet "concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion" (Smith, 1987: 220–1).

Philosophy would never again be the same. Hume's contributions to "natural philosophy," or what we would now call the natural sciences, as well as to "moral philosophy," or what concern all the subsequently subdivided disciplines relating to human nature, history, and conduct, were original, provocative, and brilliant. I contend that Hume should be considered among the most important philosophers in the entire Western tradition. Let us see why.



## Chapter 2

# Empiricism

### Introduction

In his 1783 *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, which was intended as an after-the-fact introduction to his monumental 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant wrote: “I openly confess my recollection of David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction” (Kant, 1783/1950: 8). Kant went on to write that Hume “certainly struck a spark by which light might have been kindled had it caught some inflammable substance and had its smouldering fire been carefully nursed and developed” (Kant, 1783/1950: 5). What was it that Hume wrote that shook Kant so deeply, spurring Kant to divert from his previously solid but not particularly distinguished career as a philosopher of metaphysics to undertake a comprehensive examination—or “critique”—of the human faculties of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment? It was Hume’s analysis of cause and effect, or, more specifically, Hume’s argument that we do not, and cannot, have actual knowledge regarding causation.

### Causation

How can we know whether one thing is the cause of another? Suppose I say that smoking causes cancer, that my striking a bell with a hammer causes the sound, or that raising the mandatory minimum wage will cause unemployment. We all have innumerable *beliefs* about causal relationships, including perhaps these; but how do we *know*? How can we be sure that when we say that A causes B, it is in fact A that caused B? How can we know that B did not merely follow A but was unconnected to A, or that B was not in fact caused by some perhaps

unobserved or unknown C? This turns out to be a more complicated question than one might initially suppose. Many things might be correlated, for example, without having any causal relationship. For example, as seatbelt-wearing in automobiles increased during the 1980s and 1990s, deaths of astronauts in spacecraft decreased; but that does not mean that my wearing a seatbelt will save an astronaut's life. Similarly, the death rate in hospitals is higher than the death rate outside of hospitals; but that does not mean that hospitals kill people—rather, that is where people who are dying often go.

What Hume noticed was that our “causal” inferences often take the following route: we see A happen, and then we see B happen, from which we infer that A caused B. Now, it is a familiar fallacy to assume that just because one thing happens after another thing, therefore the earlier thing caused the later thing.<sup>7</sup> Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated on June 4, 1968; a few days later, I was born—but of course Kennedy's assassination did not cause my birth. That is an easy inference to refute, but Hume wants to take an even harder case. Suppose that *every* time A occurs, B follows; let us even suppose that every time A occurs, B follows *immediately*. Should we therefore infer that A is the cause of B? Even in such a case, Hume reasoned, the conclusion is not certain. The reason, he thought, was because we do not actually perceive the causal mechanism. What we perceive instead is a conjunction of events, A and (then) B. We might even perceive the two to be “constantly conjoined” (E1 4.1.23: 27). What we do not perceive, however, is the causal link itself. What is transferred between the two events? What are the “secret powers” (E1 4.2.29: 34) that causes have to bring about their effects? We assume there is a connection; we might even assume that there must be a connection. But consider: Is it possible that the next time A happens, B does not? Not whether we think it is likely or probable that B will not ensue after A; is it *possible*?

To illustrate, Hume asks: Will the sun rise tomorrow? (E1 4.1.21: 25–6). If we are asked this question, we will answer, “Yes, of course.” But is it possible that something, however improbable, could happen that would prevent the sun from rising tomorrow? If so, then we cannot be absolutely certain that it will rise tomorrow. And, yes, it is possible that something might happen that would prevent the sun from rising tomorrow; hence, we cannot be certain

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7 This is called the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (or, “after this, therefore because of this”) fallacy.

that it will. Now, none of us would, or should, expect that the sun will not rise tomorrow. But what is the basis of our confidence? It is because every previous day in the history of the world (at least as far as we know), the sun has risen. On the basis of uncontradicted past experience, we instinctively form to ourselves the inferential rule that whatever has always happened in the past will happen again in the future. But then it is the instinct that leads us to the conclusion, not a rational argument. Thus, what we considered causal reasoning is instead psychological instinct based on past experience.

Compare the following two arguments. Argument 1: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. This argument is logically valid, which means that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must also be true. That is, if it is the case that all men are mortal, and if it is the case that Socrates is (or was) a man, then it must be the case that Socrates too is mortal. This argument is called a deductive syllogism:

- Premise 1: All  $s$  are  $p$ . (All men are mortal.)
- Premise 2:  $X$  is  $s$ . (Socrates is a man.)
- Conclusion: Therefore,  $x$  is  $p$ . (Therefore, Socrates is mortal.)

Consider, however, the following Argument 2: We have observed many swans; all of those we have observed are white; therefore, all swans are white. Is this argument valid? That is, if the premises (“we have observed many swans” and “all of them are white”) are true, must the conclusion (“all swans are white”) also be true? Well, no. Perhaps we have not observed all the swans there are, for example. And, in fact, it turns out that there are rare black swans. The inference that all swans are white is an inductive, not a deductive, conclusion, and the confidence we should have in it is proportional to the evidence—but is never conclusive. If we had observed only one swan, and it was white, then the confidence we should have in the conclusion “all swans are white” should be very low; if we had observed one million swans, and all of them were white, then we should have higher confidence in the conclusion “all swans are white.” Until we had observed literally every single swan there is, however, we could not have perfect confidence in the conclusion.

Now, why go through all this? Because it turns out that science is based on induction, and hence on inferences made on the basis of past experience.

Even if we have made accurate observations of past events, all that we could thereby conclude with certainty is that this is how things were *in the past*. But science is not only about describing the past; it is about predicting the future as well. We want to know not only how gravity worked in the past but how it will work the next time we launch a space shuttle. We want to know not just how penicillin interacted with bacteria in the past but how it will affect the next infection we get. Here is where Hume's question becomes acute: how do we know that what happened in the past—even what happened consistently in the past—will also happen in the future? In practice, he reasoned, we merely assume that whatever held consistently in the past will (therefore) hold consistently in the future. And perhaps it will. But what is the basis on which we believe that what happened in the past will happen in the future? Because that is what happened in the past! Therefore, that belief too is based on our past experience. So, what can give us confidence about the future? What indeed. It was the realization that Hume's argument effectively called all scientific knowledge into question that shook Kant and woke him from his dogmatic slumber.

## **Empiricism**

Hume's philosophical methodology can be described as "empiricism." Unlike many philosophers before Hume and since, he was skeptical that we could learn about the world by merely thinking about it. We needed to observe it. We must run experiments; we must gather and assess data; we must measure and quantify. We make tentative hypotheses, and then test them against further observations. For Hume, this holds as much for physical sciences—how things move in the world, how chemicals interact, what materials should be used and how they should be configured to build bridges—as it did for the human sciences—how medicines affect us, how our passions motivate us, how our beliefs are formed, where our moral sentiments come from, what governments do or should do, where wealth comes from.

Hume justified his methodology in three steps. Step one: "Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less to human nature, and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another" (T Intro.4: 4). Step two: "If therefore the sciences of Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, have such

a dependence on the knowledge of man, what may be expected in the other sciences, whose connexion with human nature is more close and intimate?” (T Intro.5: 4). And, finally, step three: “as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation” (T Intro.7: 4). What Hume called the “experimental philosophy” (T Intro.7: 4) that worked so well for Newton and allowed him to take such great strides in understanding the operations and effects of gravity could perhaps, Hume argued, also help us create a “science of man,” providing a foundation for understanding human nature, morality, politics, law, and even religion.

It was in the area of religion that got Hume into hot water. Hume lived in a religious age in which, despite various—even bloody—conflicts about doctrine, one widespread belief was that God’s existence and nature could be ascertained and demonstrated through *a priori* argument. That is, we could prove that God exists by mere operation of reason, the way we could prove that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. Similarly, we could demonstrate the necessary attributes of God, including His omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Even further, we could demonstrate numerous aspects of God’s will and our moral duties to God, to each other, and to ourselves, based on similar logical reasoning—that is, without relying on empirical observation. In other words, we did not need to conduct empirical experiments to know about God; we could look to our minds, or hearts, and prove through pure reason everything there was to know.

Hume overturned that view by arguing that human knowledge is limited by and dependent on experience. We can know where the stone will fall when we throw it because we have seen it thrown before and observed; we can know what the effect of alcohol will be on those who drink it because we have seen it before and observed; we can know what will happen to the billiard ball when I strike it with the cue stick because we have seen it before and observed. But Hume makes an even bolder claim. We can know these things in *no other way* than by observation. That means that if we have no relevant experience or observations, we can have no knowledge, only idle speculation. If we have only few observations, we can formulate hypotheses, but we cannot have much confidence in them.

What, then, are the faculties humans have at their disposal to learn about the world, and what kinds of things can be known by them? “All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*” (E1 4.1.20: 25). And human beings have, according to Hume, only two paths available to knowledge: *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning, which apply to “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact,” respectively. *A priori* reasoning relates to what we can know with certainty but that is not based or reliant on experience. Examples of proper *a priori* reasoning are geometry, (pure) mathematics, and deductive logic. We can know the properties of a triangle, for example, without measuring triangles; we can know that the limit of  $1/n^x$  as  $x$  approaches infinity is zero, without making any empirical observations; we can know that all bachelors are unmarried males simply by knowing the definitions of the terms, and without having to survey all bachelors and asking them whether they are unmarried males.

By contrast, *a posteriori* reasoning, which applies to “matters of fact,” relates to what we must consult experience and observation to know. How many people are there on the earth? What spectrum of light is visible to the human eye? What is the structure of DNA? Questions like these relate to the real existence of entities in the world, the way the world actually and in fact is. Here, Hume argued, our only available faculty for learning is empirical observation. To know how many people there are on the earth, we have to go out and count. To know what the structure of DNA is, we have to look and see. Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Ptolemy (c. AD 100–170) constructed sophisticated models of the universe, complete with arguments that everything must move in perfect circles (because that seemed agreeable to pure reason) and that the earth was at the center of everything (because that seemed agreeable to the grandeur of human beings). Their models were beautiful, but they were also false, as it turned out. How did we discover that they were false? By observation. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), and others did what Hume suggested: they went out and looked. They made observations of movements, and found that things did not move in perfect circles; then they realized that observations could not be squared with the hypothesis that the earth was at the center of our solar system—but were remarkably consistent with an alternative

hypothesis, namely that the sun was at the center. That offended people's sense of rational propriety, not to mention their religious convictions that God would have put us at the center; but still, the observed data were what they were. As Galileo was reported, perhaps apocryphally, to have said upon exiting the Inquisition trial at which he was excommunicated, "and yet it moves"—in other words, I see your religious beliefs requiring the fixity and centrality of the earth, but, sorry, the earth still moves.

The test of whether any proposition falls into the category of "relations of ideas" as opposed to "matters of fact" is, according to Hume, whether the contrary of the proposition is possible. In other words, can one deny the proposition without creating a (logical) contradiction? If one can, then the proposition is likely a "matter of fact"; if one cannot—that is, if denying it is not conceivable or leads to a contradiction—then the proposition is a "relation of ideas." As examples, consider these two propositions: (1) "That three times five is equal to the half of thirty" (E1 4.1.20: 25); and (2) that the sun will rise tomorrow (E1 4.1.21: 25–6). If we deny proposition (1), it involves us in a contradiction: it would mean that a specific given number, 15, is both equal to itself and not equal to itself. By contrast, if we deny proposition (2), it involves us in no contradiction: that the sun will not rise tomorrow is "no less intelligible a proposition" than that it will rise (E1 4.1.21: 26). Thus, Hume concluded, the former is a "relation of ideas," and can be known by merely examining the relevant ideas themselves; the latter, on the other hand, is a "matter of fact," and can be known, if at all, only by empirical observation.

These two ways of understanding the world—*a priori* and *a posteriori*—thus have, according to Hume, their proper scopes and objects, and they should not be conflated. We should not try to rely on observation to know whether a deductive logical argument is valid; we should rely on the principles of logic themselves. And we should not use deductive logic to determine "matters of fact and existence"; we should rely instead on observation and experiment. As slow and uncertain as these latter are, they are all we have.

Hume's deflation of the powers of human reason went so far as to suggest that reason by itself is inert. Although it can reveal relations of ideas, and it can suggest to us the likely consequences of events based on past experience, Hume claimed that reason by itself cannot motivate us to do anything: "Reason

is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (T 2.3.3: 266). Knowing the right thing to do, which reason might be able to ascertain, does not, according to Hume, equate to doing it: we need motivation to act, which only our passions can provide. For Hume, reason, “this little agitation of the brain” (D pt. 2: 19), was thus quite limited indeed.

The limits of reason apply to our religious beliefs as well. The claim that God exists is, Hume argues, a hypothesis about a matter of fact and existence. That is, either God exists in fact or He does not. Suppose we deny that God exists: does that involve us in a logical contradiction? No: the propositions “God exists” and “God does not exist” are, regardless of which one we believe, equally intelligible and readily understandable as propositions. That means, however, that by Hume’s test a proposition about God’s existence is a matter of fact, not a relation of ideas; and that means that it can be known only by empirical observation, not by mere operation of logic or reason.

“The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience. If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear to produce anything” (E1 12.3.132: 164). In other words, the only firm basis of knowledge our limited capacities have at their disposal regarding matters of fact is observation of past experience. Even that is still ultimately uncertain, however, because, as we have seen, Hume argues that we do not perceive causal mechanisms and have no capacity to understand the world other than by experience. If we have had no experience with God, then we can have no knowledge of Him—no more than the knowledge we could have of, say, alien populations on other planets. “It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behaviour” (E1 12.3.132: 164). Hume concluded: “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence”; further, the wise man “proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to what side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and



when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability” (E1 10.1.87: 110–11).

To put an exclamation point on what Hume’s argument does to religion, or more particularly to the relative confidence we can have in the various religious and metaphysical claims that theologians make, Hume ended his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* thus:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these [that is, Hume’s] principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (E1 12.3.132: 165)

Perhaps it is no wonder that Hume was viewed as a skeptic. His empiricism left him little basis on which to have confidence in the truth of religious claims or propositions about metaphysical or supernatural entities. Our cognitive capacities, Hume argued, are not sufficient to warrant certainty about matters of fact and existence because our capacities do not reach beyond our experience. We cannot know about the existence of things we have not observed, which includes “secret” causal mechanisms. “These ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry” (E1 4.1.26: 30). Does that mean Hume was an atheist? Not quite: because a wise man “proportions his belief to the evidence,” the Humean answer to the question of whether God exists should probably be something like: “There is insufficient evidence to know.”

What does Hume’s empirical method reveal, however, regarding other elements of human existence? What does, or can, it tell us, for example, about morality and justice? Let us turn to that in the next chapter.



## Chapter 3

# Justice, Conflict, and Scarcity

### Introduction

In chapter 2, we saw that Hume advocated an “experimental method” for learning about the world. Human reason, when it operates without the benefit of experience or observation, is quite limited—capable of knowledge only in “relations of ideas,” or fields like mathematics and logic, where true propositions cannot even be conceived false. A proposition like “the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides” (E1 4.1.20: 25), for example, cannot possibly be false, since the conclusion (“equal to the square of the two sides”) is logically implied by the definitions of the terms “square,” “hypotenuse,” and “side.” For all other areas of human inquiry, all the matters Hume categorized as “moral reasoning”—in which he placed “history, chronology, geography, and astronomy,” “politics, natural philosophy, physic, chemistry, &c.,” and “Morals and criticism” (E1 12.3.132: 164–5)—what we are capable of knowing can be determined only by *a posteriori* reasoning, or inductive analysis of experience and observation.

As we saw, according to Hume, *a posteriori* reasoning about matters concerning cause and effect and matters of fact and existence are not capable of leading to absolute certainty. In such cases we instead deal with probabilities—it is *more likely* that the “sun will rise tomorrow” (E1 4.1.21: 25–6) than that it will not, given past experience, but we cannot be absolutely certain. Did that mean, for Hume, that the next time I consider jumping off the roof of my building, I should not have confidence in the belief that I will fall? After all, it is logically possible that the next time I jump I may fly, as opposed to fall. Hume’s answer: no, we should not stop trying to learn from past experience and by observation. We may not be able to get to absolute certainty from empirical

observation, but when past experience and constant conjunctions of events have been consistent and even uncontradicted, that gives us reason to suppose that similar patterns will hold this time (and the next, and so on)—until experience gives us a new result. Philosophy may have demonstrated the limits of human ability to know causation with certainty, but, Hume wrote: “Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (E1 1.4: 9). In other words, we still have to live in this world, and we still have to do our best to engage with it and with other people productively and peacefully, which means that whatever meager tools we have to understand the world and to plan for the future, we have to use them. What alternative do we have?

### Origins of justice

Hume applied his empirical “experimental method” not just to the natural sciences, however, but to the “science of man” as well—which includes morality and politics, or what we might call political economy. How might Hume’s experimental method apply to, for example, justice? Is justice a matter for *a priori* inquiry or for *a posteriori*? Recall Hume’s test: if a proposition can be conceived false, then it cannot be a “relation of ideas,” or a subject of *a priori* reasoning, and must instead be a “matter of fact and existence,” or a subject of *a posteriori* reasoning. Take a proposition like “justice is giving another his due.” Can that be conceived false? Not *is* it false, but can it be *conceived* false—that is, is it possible to even imagine it being false? Hume’s answer is yes, it can be conceived false. But that means that it cannot be an *a priori* proposition, but, rather, an *a posteriori* proposition—subject to empirical verification and falsification.

And that indeed was Hume’s contention. He argued that, as with other virtues, we come to have a sense or conception of justice based on our experiences. In that way, justice is, according to Hume, an “artificial” virtue, not a “natural” one—that is, it is constructed by human beings in light of their experiences, not written into the fabric of the universe or deduced from uncontradictable premises. In the case of justice, the relevant experiences are of two sorts: what kinds of creatures human beings are, and what the nature of the human condition is. Because Hume believed that human nature is relatively fixed, however, and that the human condition, or at least some important aspects of

it, are fixed and universal as well, Hume concluded: “Tho’ the rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*” (T 3.2.1: 311). Let us investigate what Hume meant by this.

According to Hume, the first relevant fact of human nature that empirical observation reveals is that we are rather weakly supplied by nature for our ends: we have no fur, claws, fangs, or wings, which means that human beings—unlike most other creatures on earth—must cooperate and work together to attain the things they desire. Second, human beings are motivated by “*selfishness* and *limited generosity*” (T 3.2.2: 317), that is, although they do feel benevolence toward others, it is limited, and their main motivation is self-interest. Hume believed our benevolence toward others fades as they grow more distant from us: we have the strongest benevolent feelings toward our family members, then our friends, and then our acquaintances; beyond them, however, and in relation to the vast majority of people on earth, we effectively have no benevolent feelings or motivation. By contrast, our self-interest persists regardless. “Now it appears, that in the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin’d to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and ’tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons” (T 3.2.2: 314).

And the human condition? Here too Hume indicated what he believed empirical observation reveals to be two enduring facts. The first regards “the enjoyment of such possessions as we have acquir’d by our industry and good fortune,” which are, alas, “both expos’d to the violence of others, and may be transferr’d without suffering any loss or alteration” (T 3.2.2: 313): it is relatively easy for others to assail us and take our belongings, and when they do, they can then use or consume what (formerly) belonged to us. The second salient fact about the human condition is that “there is not a sufficient quantity of [possessions] to supply every one’s desires and necessities” (T 3.2.2: 313): we live in a world of scarcity, and our desires outstrip our abilities to satisfy them all. That means there will be disagreement about how to allocate and use resources, disagreement that can sometimes be violent.

How can we remedy these deficiencies? Hume argued that the purpose of society is precisely that: “As the improvement, therefore, of these goods is the chief advantage of society, so the *instability* of their possession, along with

their *scarcity*, is the chief impediment” (T 3.2.2: 313). Human beings therefore naturally enter into society. But not just any society: rather, society that alleviates the instability of possessions and enables more efficient, productive, and peaceful use of scarce resources. What have humans discovered to address this need? They developed the idea of justice, which Hume argued is a “convention” that entails notions of property, right, and obligation. “A man’s property is some object related to him. This relation is not natural, but moral, and founded on justice” (T 3.2.2: 315). Hume summarized his argument as holding “that justice takes its rise from human conventions; and that these are intended as a remedy to some inconveniencies, which proceed from the concurrence of certain *qualities* of the human mind with the *situation* of external objects. The qualities of mind are *selfishness* and *limited generosity*: And the situation of external objects is their *easy change*, join’d to their *scarcity* in comparison to the wants and desires of men” (T 3.2.2: 317). Hume’s argument is that the principles of justice are, then, of contingent historical origin, arising from our experiences living in the world.

But many thinkers before, during, and since Hume’s time have, on the contrary, believed that the principles of justice are immutable and able to be apprehended by pure reason. So why should we believe Hume that our conceptions of justice arise only from our experience, rather than being logically deducible from unchanging concepts, the way we might logically deduce the properties of a triangle from the unchanging concept of “triangle”? Hume offered a test to prove his case. Imagine that the central salient fact of humanity or the central salient fact of the human condition were changed: what would happen to our notion of justice? Specifically, instead of “selfishness and limited generosity,” imagine that “every man had a tender regard for another” (in other words, imagine that everyone was motivated by unlimited benevolence); or instead of “scarcity,” imagine that “nature supply’d abundantly all our wants and desires” (T 3.2.2: 317). What would become of the notion of justice in this imagined world? Hume argued that justice would become “useless”: we would no longer have to worry about *my* property and *yours*, because each of us could, and would, have everything we wanted; and we would no longer worry about enforcing rights or obligations, because everyone would already naturally respect others’ rights and fulfill their obligations. A claim to a right to property

in a world of superabundance would be pointless. It is therefore only because of our selfishness and limited generosity, on the one hand, and because of the scarcity of resources, on the other, that we need concepts like property, rights, and obligation, and hence a notion of justice.

### The rules of justice

Hume's empirical account of the origins of justice, and his argument that it arose from the interaction between human nature and the human condition, formed the basis of his further discussion of what justice actually entails. He had argued that we enter into society, rather than living on our own in the wild, because we are relatively weak. Our relative weakness means that it is difficult for any one of us to procure all on his own what he needs or wants,<sup>8</sup> and also that it is difficult for us to protect ourselves against the predations of others. The purpose of society, then, is to remedy these two "inconveniencies" by allowing us to cooperate with one another for mutual gain. It turns out, Hume argued, that a conception of property is required to achieve this goal, and a handful of specific "conventions" or "rules" with regard to property are necessary.

Among these rules of property are what Hume called "the stability of possession," which he claimed is "absolutely necessary to human society" (T 3.2.3: 322). Because our possessions can be so easily taken away from us and used or consumed by others, the "infinite advantages that arise from" society (T 3.2.2: 314) cannot be realized until we have confidence that what is ours remains ours until we choose to part with it. It is not enough, however, merely to have a "general rule, *that possession must be stable*" (T 3.2.3: 322); rather, the rule must be more specific. In particular, it must specify what counts as a possession, as well as by what process people can "separate their possessions" (that is, distinguish what is mine from what is yours), and transfer possessions (or "assign to each his particular portion, which he must for the future inalterably enjoy" [T 3.2.3: 323]). Hume suggested that "the most natural expedient" that would "immediately occur" (T 3.2.3: 323) to anyone regarding what rules of property would enable the stability of possession required for the benefits

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8 Throughout these discussions, Hume uses only masculine pronouns. In fidelity to his writing, and not to beg any questions, I follow Hume's convention.

from society to ensue are: occupation, prescription, accession, and succession (T 3.2.3: 324). Take these in turn.

The first way that people can come to possess something, or to create a property in it, is to *occupy* it. If you are dwelling in a cave, then we naturally, Hume claimed, “annex the idea of property” (T 3.2.3: 324) to your possession of it, and we apply the rules of justice to you and your possession: you get to use it, you get to say who comes into it, you get to say whether someone else gets to use (or even possess) it. In practice, however, it is often difficult to know who first occupied, say, a piece of land: “it often happens, that the title of first possession becomes obscure thro’ time; and that ’tis impossible to determine many controversies, which may arise concerning it” (T 3.2.3: 326). In such cases, Hume suggested his second rule, that “long possession or *prescription* naturally takes place, and gives a person sufficient property in any thing he enjoys” (T 3.2.3: 326). Hume confessed that “long possession” is an imprecise standard that “admits not of any great accuracy”; unfortunately, however, there is no *a priori* principle to which we can turn that would adjudicate such disputes once and for all. Property ownership by prescription applies when “Any considerable space of time” gives rise to a prevailing sentiment or consensus that its current occupant has title to it (T 3.2.3: 326).

The third method of acquiring possessions is *accession*, when something new is “connected in an intimate manner with objects that are already our property” (T 3.2.3: 327). So, for example, if I possess a tract of land by occupation or prescription, and on that land I plant corn, the corn that grows becomes my property by accession. This extension of my ownership takes place not by any metaphysical or theoretical principle, but, rather, because our minds “readily pass from one to the other, and make no difference in our judgments concerning them” (T 3.2.3: 327). In other words, the extension of ownership is validated by common consent and convention. A similar explanation pertains to Hume’s fourth rule, acquisition by *succession*: if your parents owned something and they died, in the absence of some clear promise or agreement otherwise, its ownership transfers to you. This principle of transference too is justified not by reference to any *a priori* principle, but because “the person’s children naturally present themselves to the mind; and being already connected



to those possessions by means of their deceased parent, we are apt to connect them still farther by the relation of property” (T 3.2.3: 329–30).

Each of these four means of acquiring property—occupation, prescription, accession, and succession—Hume offered as necessary for ensuring the stability of possession, which, as we have seen, he believed is itself necessary for the success of any society. This is thus an empirical argument, not a deduction from *a priori* first principles, a divination of God’s will, or a consultation of a metaphysical natural law. It comes from no source other than our experience in the world, and our trial-and-error attempts to cooperate successfully and productively with one another under the natural constraints we face of (1) selfishness and limited generosity and (2) scarcity of resources.

All of these methods of acquiring property pertain, however, to what Hume called “*present possession*” (T 3.2.4: 330): that is, they explain how we came to own, and to be recognized by others as owning, what we now own. What about future possession? That is, how can we come to own things that we did not occupy, that did not grow or appear on what we occupy, or that was not bequeathed to us by our parents? If you make a table and chairs from wood that grew on your land, how can I come to own it? Hume suggested that there is one more way we can come to own property, a way that is particularly significant and indeed in a developed (that is, commercial) society is the primary way we come to own things: by consensual transfer.

### **Justice, consent, and commercial society**

Among the things I own are my skills, abilities, and labour. I use them to transform the fruits of my land into other goods: I farm my land and produce crops; I cut down the trees and make tables and chairs; I raise animals on my farm and produce food; and so on. I may do these things only for my own use (or that of my family), but I could be benefited more if I could also do it for your use and you could in turn provide me with something that I cannot do, or do only with difficulty, on my land. So, we naturally—that is, without anyone telling or instructing us to do so—agree to an exchange: you give me your *x*, and in exchange I give you my *y*. We do this because in this way we are both better off. According to Hume, when such exchanges take place voluntarily, or by consent, they transfer property rights: you now own the *y*, and I now own the *x*.

Thus, *consent* gives rise to an enormously expanded range of possible goods (and services), as well as to new signatures of ownership and property. Because such transfers take place by consent, they will typically also be mutually beneficial. If either of us did not believe he would benefit from the exchange, he would not have agreed to it. We could be mistaken, of course, and not all mutually voluntary exchanges will turn out to be beneficial, or as beneficial as we hoped or expected. But benefit tends to track with voluntary choice, and voluntary choice is one of the best predictors of benefit—certainly better than forced and involuntary exchange. Hence, voluntary exchange greatly increases the likelihood of mutual betterment, and the more opportunity we have for it, the better.

Enabling more such opportunities, however, requires expanding the notion of justice, as well as the correlated notions of rights and obligations. In particular, it requires the notion of a contract, agreement, or promise, as well as the notion of a *right* to what one was promised and an *obligation* to fulfill what one promises (see T 3.2.5: 331–34). If our conventions, as well as our public institutions (more on that in chapters 4 and 5), sufficiently respect transfer by consent, people will naturally engage in it. The more they do so, the more habitual it becomes, and the more overall benefit they provide not only to themselves but to society more generally. Because each such transaction creates mutual benefit, each enables individuals to concentrate on a smaller range of activities, or to specialize, so as to increase their production of a particular good or service, thereby enabling them to exchange for more of other people’s production. As the overall quantity of any good or service increases, however, other things being equal, the price—whether in kind, in goods or services, or in money—of the good or service comes down. And that enables yet more people to enjoy the good or service in question. This has a multiplier effect: more voluntary exchanges, with more people, increase the overall supply of goods and services in society, thereby enriching everyone.

Over time, Hume believed, we can develop the mental habits of recognizing and respecting one another’s property, and of exchanging for mutual benefit. This happens naturally and does not depend on our “limited benevolence” but rather on our more constant “selfishness”: “Hence I learn to do a service to another, without bearing him any real kindness; because I foresee,

that he will return my service, in expectation of another of the same kind, and in order to maintain the same correspondence of good offices with me or with others” (T 3.2.5: 334–35). In this way, commerce emerges, enabling ever greater production of goods and services, and enabling ever greater prosperity for a society.

Hume believed this process occurs naturally, or can occur naturally, without any divine intervention and without any oversight from our (mortal) superiors—i.e., government. All that is required is for others not to interfere in the process, and the proper conceptions of justice, property, right, and obligation will emerge; our behaviours, encouraged by mutual benefit, will lead to habits, and the concepts of justice, property, and so on will get reinforced and strengthened. If this happens often and regularly enough, we will come to view these notions of justice and property as being moral obligations that should be enforced, even coercively if necessary. They can even become regarded, he thought, as “fundamental laws of nature”: the “laws” of “*the stability of possession, of its transference by consent, and of the performance of promises.*” ’Tis on the strict observance of these three laws, that the peace and security of human society entirely depend; nor is there any possibility of establishing a good correspondence among men, where these are neglected” (T 3.2.6: 337).

This final claim, that “good correspondence among men” depends on these three fundamental laws, constituted, for Hume, the reason they are endorsed. They are justified because of their beneficial effect on human society, on their ability to effectuate mutual betterment. They may or may not be intended by God—Hume was agnostic on that—but in any case, it is not, Hume claimed, by consulting God’s will that we come to them. We arrive at them instead by trial and error as we try to make our way in the world given our psychology and the scantiness with which nature has provided us. The normativity, moral obligation, or aura of morality that we attach to the following of these rules arises, according to Hume, by repeated and reinforced experience that following them leads to mutual benefit and that violating them leads to loss, cost, and destruction. They give rise to habits of behaviour, then conventions and norms, and are also reinforced by our cognizance of others’ expectations that we respect and follow the conventions and norms. They are thus a thoroughly historical and empirical affair, in their origins and in their

applications, and they depend entirely on our experiences and our interactions with one another.

The culmination of this process of natural development of justice and its entailed rules of property was, for Hume, a commercial society. The more people with whom we could transact, the more specialization there could be, which means the more goods and services there could be. So, it would be beneficial if there were some way we could ensure that others, even those we do not know, would respect and follow justice and the rules of property. It would, in other words, be better if there were some public institutions that could recognize and, if necessary, enforce justice and property.

Perhaps, then, we should have a government. If so, what would that government look like? What would, or should, it do? What would, or should, it not do? To those questions we turn in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

# The Origins of Government and the Social Contract

### Introduction

As an empiricist, Hume was not given to speculative theorizing about causal relations in the world, about the principles of justice or the proper conception of property, or about what the transcendent principles of morality are. With the exceptions of things like mathematics, Hume was skeptical that we can know anything about things we have not observed. So while we can know with certainty that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, because the conclusion follows logically from the inherent features of a triangle and a right angle, when it comes to things like the effects and strength of gravity, the structure of DNA, or where the principles of justice come from, Hume thought we could not just sit in our offices and think hard: we have to go out and look.

This is the way that Hume believed Newton made such a tremendous improvement over astronomers like Aristotle and Ptolemy: he observed the way things move, looked for patterns, formulated hypotheses to explain their regular behaviour, inferred predictions about future behaviour based on the hypotheses, then made further observations to falsify or corroborate the hypotheses, and revised the hypotheses accordingly. Newton's universal law of gravitation, which he published in his 1687 *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, were observation-tested, not based on *a priori* theorizing, and were accepted because of their empirical explanatory power, not because they comported with any prior conception of how the world "should" behave. What made Newton the great philosopher Hume (and many others) held him to be was that he enabled us to understand how significant parts of the world work—and the

principles work: they explained past events, and they enabled predictions that turned out to be true. That, for Hume, was “natural philosophy” *par excellence*.

If that Newtonian empirical methodology could work so well for gravity and for explaining motion both on earth and in the heavens, perhaps a similar methodology could be applied for understanding human social phenomena. So, Hume wanted to construct a “science of man” that would adapt Newtonian methodology from natural philosophy to “moral philosophy,” or to the study of human nature and human-constructed phenomena, like language, morality, and government. Could we study these social phenomena and discover repeated patterns, regular behaviour that could give rise to hypotheses that could be subject to empirical verification? As we saw in chapter 3, Hume believed that employing the Newtonian empirical “experimental method” could enable us to understand, among other things, where our concept of justice comes from, what purpose it serves, and how it entails notions like property, right, and obligation. Because the rules of justice are created by human beings but at the same time arise from fixed features of human nature and the human condition, Hume says they are *artificial* but not *arbitrary*. That is, they are in fact human-made, meaning that if there were no humans there would be no principles of justice, just as if there were no humans there would be no law or language. But not just any principles of justice will do: because they are constructed by people who are self-interested with limited benevolence and under conditions of scarcity, they will necessarily be adapted to precisely such creatures in precisely such conditions.

If you hear echoes of Darwinian evolutionary theory in Hume’s account of justice, property, and so on, you are not far off. Of course, Darwin did not publish his theory of evolution until a century later (the *Origin of Species* was published in 1859), so Hume did not have Darwin’s theory in his intellectual arsenal. But Hume’s account of our conceptions of justice and property as well as of many of the other social institutions human beings create had a distinctively evolutionary flavor: like water flowing to the path of least resistance, we find ourselves discovering rules of behaviour, organization, and association that ease the “correspondence among men” and constitute “artificial contrivances for the convenience and advantage of society” (T 3.2.5: 337). Just as the sciences of boat-making and ship-building can, in a profound sense, be said to have been

created by the sea, human social institutions were created by human nature and the human condition.

The flow of water can be altered, however. We can put up dams, obstacles, and diversions, some of which might turn out to be beneficial while others turn out to be destructive. The case is similar for institutions that human beings have created to recognize and enforce conceptions of justice. That brings us to government. Throughout human history there have been thousands of experiments in government, thousands of different systems constructed and applied in different ways. Some of them have been better than others; some of them have been destructive, while some (many fewer) have been beneficial. Though debates raged in Hume's time about what sort of government we ought to have, and similar debates continue to rage today, Hume offered a way of looking at government that might allow us to make some headway in separating the good from the bad, the beneficial from the destructive: Take a look. Review the historical experiments that have been run and evaluate them objectively to see which have enabled their members to prosper and flourish, and which have not. What would such a review reveal?

### **The origins of government**

Hume offers two accounts of the origins of government. One account, which appears in his early *Treatise of Human Nature*, explores why a government would be necessary and what proper purpose it would serve. The other account appears in several of his later essays, in which he explores the historical development of actual governments. The former outlines what government should do, whereas the latter account focuses on what they actually do. As one might expect, the latter departs rather significantly from the former. But Hume's purpose in giving these two accounts was, first, to help us see clearly what the nature of government is and, second, give us some potential guideposts for reform. Let us take the two accounts in turn.

In the *Treatise*, Hume had argued that entering into society allowed people to alleviate, on the one hand, their relative weakness as individuals, and, on the other, the relative ease with which their possessions could be taken from them. Humans are not particularly big, strong, or fast, compared with other animals, and individually they are relatively easy prey. They have extensive

and complicated desires, but they possess little ability to satisfy many of them on their own. For these reasons, humans do much better, and their prospects for reducing the hardships and misery they face (to say nothing of leading a fulfilling life of happiness) increase significantly, if they work in cooperation with other humans. That has indeed been the secret of humanity's success as a species. We might not have fur, claws, or wings, but we do have language and reason, and the latter two enable us to plan, coordinate, and cooperate in ways that have proven to best virtually every other species, including those whose members are individually much more powerful than any single human. Our language and reason have enabled us to become, in many ways, the top species on earth, and the only species that has been able to understand, subdue, and control large parts of nature and put it to our own uses. That has happened only because of our ability to cooperate, which is what Hume means by entering into "society."

Humanity's ability to coordinate its efforts also, however, allows it to prey on other humans. Humans can coordinate attacks and raids, and much of human history is marked by humanity's apparent thirst for predation. Our selfishness and limited generosity have frequently led groups to dehumanize and even brutalize the members of other groups, killing, enslaving, colonizing, and stealing from them. These unfortunate marks on our history raise an interesting philosophical question, however: if each of us wants to improve his own condition, if peaceful cooperation is so beneficial to us, and if respecting the rules of justice and property are so essential for enabling the beneficial cooperation that allows improvement in our situations, then why would people ever disrespect justice and property? As Hume put the question: "Since, therefore, men are so sincerely attach'd to their interest, and their interest is so much concern'd in the observance of justice, and this interest is so certain and avow'd; it may be ask'd, how any disorder can ever arise in society, and what principle there is in human nature so *powerful* as to overcome so strong a passion, or so *violent* as to obscure so clear a knowledge?" (T 3.2.7: 342).

Hume's answer was that human beings are short-sighted. While we may understand that in some overall or global sense the rules of justice and property are necessary for us to achieve what we want, nevertheless in the moment, or in the heat of the moment, we may think that we can benefit ourselves by violating



those rules without thereby significantly endangering the beneficial effects of the overall system of justice and property. Hence people may often “prefer any trivial advantage, that is present, to the maintenance of order in society, which so much depends on the observance of justice. The consequences of every breach of equity seem to lie very remote, and are not able to counter-balance any immediate advantage, that may be reap’d from it” (T 3.2.7: 343). Because of our preference for short-term gain even at the risk of long-term loss, many of us will take advantage of situations where we can benefit ourselves by violating the rules of justice and property, even while we want others to respect those rules and even when we ourselves benefit from widespread respect for them.

One way to think about this worry is by considering what the contemporary economist Robert Frank calls “golden opportunities” (see Frank, 1988: 72–5). A golden opportunity arises when you could benefit by breaking some moral rule you otherwise accept, but you know you would not be caught or punished for it. Consider, as an example, taking a ream of paper from your office for your personal use at home. Could you, if you wanted to, find an opportunity to do this when no one would know that you did so? Almost certainly. Would this be a breach of the rules of justice and property? Unless you had permission to do so, yes it would. This is a “golden opportunity.” Once you begin thinking about it, you will probably realize that you have countless such opportunities all the time; we all do. Most of us will not avail ourselves of most of them, but some will. Even a relatively small proportion of golden opportunists can weaken the trust we have in each other, the faith we have in the rules of justice and property, and thus endanger the benefits to us all that respect for those rules can enable.

Now, one breach of justice and property might not have much effect. (Would anyone at your office even notice if just one ream of paper went missing?) That can easily lead us to think that it is no big deal, that this one violation does not have any significant effect or even any effect at all on the larger scheme of justice and property; and if we are motivated—we really want to use that ream of paper at home—we can all too easily discount whatever remote negative effect our one opportunism will have. Of course, everyone else can reason similarly in his or her own case, and such thinking can engender widespread opportunism. Even if the opportunism in which any one of us engages has little effect, their cumulative effect can be devastating. It can lead to distrust

in each other and in our public institutions, and even those of us who refrain from opportunism might begin to feel like dupes if we come to believe that everyone else is doing it—and so we do it too.

That, Hume argued, is where government can come in. Government can provide an “expedient, by which men cure their natural weakness, and lay themselves under the necessity of observing the laws of justice and equity, notwithstanding their violent propensity to prefer contiguous to remote” (T 3.2.7: 344). To achieve this goal, government is created and empowered to protect and enforce the rules of justice and property. The officers of this government would then both “execute the laws of justice” as well as “decide all controversies concerning them” (T 3.2.7: 344). If they do so effectively, with objectivity and impartiality, then citizens can have trust in the security of their lives, property, and agreements, which will give them the freedom they need to pursue mutually voluntary and productive associations with others, as well as confidence that other people and their shared public institutions will allow only cooperative and never extractive transactions. If we have the right institutions, Hume argues that the benefits to all of us will be manifold: “Thus bridges are built; harbours open’d; ramparts rais’d; canals form’d; fleets equip’d; and armies disciplin’d; every where, by the care of government, which, tho’ compos’d of men subject to all human infirmities, becomes, by one of the finest and most subtile inventions imaginable, a composition, that is, in some measure, exempted from all these infirmities” (T 3.2.7: 345).

That, then, is what government should do, and what its proper purpose is. What does it in fact do? And what are the historical origins of actually existing governments? Here Hume had a very different story to tell.

The first place to look is Hume’s essay “Of the Original Contract,” in which he took up the question of whether there is such a thing as a “social contract” indicating the duties citizens have toward their government or country and, if so, what obligations or duties it entails. Hume claimed that many believe that government is founded “altogether on the consent of the PEOPLE,” and therefore “suppose that there is a kind of *original contract*, by which the subjects have tacitly reserved the power of resisting their sovereign, whenever they find themselves aggrieved by that authority, with which they have, for certain purposes, voluntarily entrusted him” (EMPL: 466). But is there such

an original contract, or a social contract of any kind? Hume's answer is no. It is a historical and philosophical fiction: "Almost all the governments, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record in story, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people" (EMPL: 471).

Cast your mind's eye across the world today, or back through history: where, Hume asked, were people asked to consent to their government? Even in so-called democracies, like, for example, ancient Athens, although some people were allowed to vote on some things, still there were large numbers of people who were not allowed to vote (women, slaves, aliens, the propertyless, and so on), and in any case there were large proportions of state activity that were beyond the reach of anyone's voting. A similar situation is still in place today, including in countries like Canada and the United States. Consider, for example, that in 2019, Canada had 287,978 federal employees (not including most of the RCMP or Canadian Forces). Of these, the only ones elected are federal MPs, or 388 of them. That means that only 0.13 percent of Canadian federal employees are subject to election, and 99.87 are unelected. Similarly, in 2018, the United States federal government had 2,124,062 employees (not including military and Post Office employees). Of these, 537 are subject to election (435 members of the House of Representatives, 100 members of the Senate, the president, and the vice president). That means that 99.97 percent are unelected. Because each individual adult American citizen may vote for only two senatorial offices, one congressional office, the president, and the vice president, that means that 99.9998 percent of all federal office holders are beyond the reach of the electoral authority any individual citizen has. Yet their laws, regulations, mandates, and restrictions are enforced on all citizens, and the terms and conditions of their employment, as well as the scope of their authority, are beyond the scrutiny, authority, and oversight of American citizens.

Hume wrote: "The face of the earth is continually changing, by the increase of small kingdoms into great empires, by the dissolution of great empires into smaller kingdoms, by the planting of colonies, by the migration of tribes. Is there any thing discoverable in all these events but force and violence? Where is the mutual agreement or voluntary association so much talked of?" (EMPL: 471). Hence, the idea that there has ever been anything like a

social contract is spurious and fanciful. Think of contracts in other walks of life, say employment contracts. They list obligations on both sides, what each side promises the other; they have stipulations regarding breach and punishment; they have terms for withdrawal; and they are entered into explicitly, by signing or some other official act of engagement and promise. For the overwhelming majority of the world's people, however, nothing like any of these elements happened or are in place. People are born in countries and subject to their governments' authority and laws; even if they eventually are able to vote, they can vote only on some small range of things the government does, and in any case the power of their vote is considerably diminished by being just one among many—sometimes millions—of votes. The idea that “the people” vote and thus that politicians are subject to the “will of the people” is a similar philosophical legerdemain: “the people” is not a single, aggregated mass or consciousness; it is made up of individuals with unique identities and very different schedules of goals, values, purposes, and preferences. Thus, there is no real sense in which they have any single, united will, and therefore no real sense in which whoever gets elected can reflect this “will of the people.”

If governments do not actually represent the will of the people or rest on the consent of the governed, however, then on what does their authority rest? Hume's answer is “opinion.” Consider, Hume suggested, “the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers” (EMPL: 32). This is puzzling, given that their greater numbers means that “FORCE is always on the side of the governed” (EMPL: 32). How, then, do small numbers of rulers manage to exercise authority over large numbers of citizens? Hume's answer was that it is “on opinion only that government is founded” (EMPL: 32). Hume suggested that over time people come to think not only that government can serve their interests—which, after all, Hume argued in his *Treatise* is the central purpose for government—but, more than that, that their current government is in fact doing so. Growing up in a country gives people a romantic attachment to it, and, just as we can come to overlook a family member's failings out of our love for her, we overlook the reality of our government's failures and malfeasances and corruptions and abuses, and convince ourselves to support it regardless.

In addition to this belief in the overall goodness and benefit of our government, we can also, Hume argued, come to believe in the justice of our government. That is, we come to believe that almost whatever it does is right, just, and proper, that its authority can be trusted and its behaviour excused. Think of an alcoholic and abusive parent: growing up with him and loving him as our father will incline us to forgive and excuse any number of his bad behaviours and actions; it may take decades for us to realize just how bad a person he was, and even then we might still forgive and excuse him. The case is similar, Hume argued, with our government. An objective and sober look at one's government's actual activities—not its words, pretenses, and claims, but its actual behaviour—would almost certainly require a radical reevaluation of our opinion of it. For most of us, however, this is too much to ask. We would rather continue to believe in the comforting and reassuring myths about our government than experience the disenchantment of viewing it as it actually is. Here is how Hume described this progress of sentiments people have toward their government:

[W]hen a new government is established, by whatever means, the people are commonly dissatisfied with it, and pay obedience more from fear and necessity, than from any idea of allegiance or of moral obligation. [...] Time, by degrees, removes all these difficulties, and accustoms the nation to regard, as their lawful or native princes, that family, which, at first, they considered as usurpers or foreign conquerors. [...] The original establishment was formed by violence, and submitted to from necessity. The subsequent administration is also supported by power, and acquiesced in by the people, not as a matter of choice, but of obligation. They imagine not that their consent gives their prince a title: But they willingly consent, because they think, that, from long possession, he has acquired a title, independent of their choice or inclination. (EMPL: 475)

One example of a reality about our government that we often prefer to turn away from and ignore is that every law, regulation, mandate, and restriction enacted and every good or service provided by the government is ultimately based either on force or the threat of force. In this, the government is fundamentally

different from virtually every other walk of human life. If you do not like the way this person treats you, you end your relationship and move on; if you do not like the service at this coffee shop, you go to a different one; if you do not like your boss, you quit and go elsewhere. In any of these cases, and countless others, you retain an opt-out option, or the right to say “no, thank you” and go elsewhere. But if the Internal Revenue Service tells you that you need to pay it this amount of money, you cannot say “no, thank you”—or, if you did, eventually people with guns would arrive to take you away. The situation is similar with other laws, regulations, and so on: if you do not comply or obey, people with guns will eventually come for you. We do not like to think about that, however. We prefer to think that if the government provides, say, health care for its citizens, it is simply providing an important benefit to them; we do not like to think that to do so it is forcibly taking money and property from its citizens, or that it is forcing doctors, nurses, technicians, drug manufacturers, insurers, and so on to comply with its wishes. So, we turn away from those ugly realities and focus instead on the benefit provided (or hoped to be provided), and we ignore where it comes from and how it is procured.

It is similar to how we judge our own characters. We construct pleasing myths about ourselves, flattering stories about our characters and personalities and behaviour that make us feel good about ourselves. If we instead viewed ourselves from a completely objective and disinterested perspective, it would be too uncomfortable, too disappointing, too painful. So, we don't. The same, Hume contended, holds with how we view our government, our country, and our leaders. They might be terrible, and they might engage in all manner of malfeasance, but they are “ours,” and we would rather not think about the bad things. So, government arises from conquest and usurpation, and it relies on the submission and acquiescence to which we are habituated and which is supported by the rationalizing myths—including that there is some kind of “social contract”—that we construct and tell ourselves.

Given this reality (or alleged reality) of government's nature and operations, however, what sort of person do you suppose would be attracted to working in the government, or to leading it? Perhaps some of them would be people who, initially unacquainted with the actual operations of government but persuaded by the myths we tell ourselves about it, would wish to make the

world a better place and decide to become “public servants” (note the term) to improve society. They would soon confront government’s reality, however, including all its waste and inefficiency, all its intrusions into others’ private business, all its oversight of others’ lives, all its special pleading and rent seeking and favoritism and cronyism and profiteering and buccaneering. For a decent person with even minimal respect for the dignity and moral agency of others, it would be too much to bear, and he would simply leave and seek an honest living elsewhere. Who would remain? Precisely the person, or type of person, who does not mind engaging in these kinds of activities, maybe one who positively enjoys it. So, there is an adverse selection problem: the people we would most want in government are the least likely to be attracted to it or remain in it, and the people most attracted to it are likely those we would least want in it.

It is in light of this observation that Hume made one of his most arresting claims about politics: “It is, therefore, a just *political* maxim, *that every man must be supposed a knave*: Though at the same time, it appears somewhat strange that a maxim should be true in *politics*, which is false in *fact*” (EMPL: 42–3). Most of us are not, in fact, knaves—a word that for Hume was quite negative, something like a wickedly dishonest scoundrel—and in our private associations with others any tendency we have to knavery is kept in relative check by the fact that others can decline to associate with us if they wish. Even if I wanted to be a knave, the fact that no one would hire me, partner with me, or even associate with me provides a strong disciplining factor that acts as a disincentive for my negative inclinations. In government, however, this disciplining factor dissipates. Hume wrote:

But where a considerable body of men act together, this check is, in a great measure, removed; since a man is sure to be approved of by his own party, for what promotes the common interest; and he soon learns to despise the clamours of adversaries. To which we may add, that every court or senate is determined by the greater number of voices; so that, if self-interest influences only the majority, (as it will always do) the whole senate follows the allurements of this separate interest, and acts as if it contained not one member, who had any regard to public interest or liberty. (EMPL: 43)

This, for Hume, gives us even greater reason to be wary of government, and yet more reason to circumscribe its powers and authorities carefully.

### **Tacit consent**

We should note one final claim Hume made regarding the notion of a social contract. One often hears that if one does not like one's country's government, or its laws, taxes, regulations, and so on, then one should leave. The corollary of this claim is that if you choose to stay in your country, you are thereby giving your consent, implicitly if not explicitly, to your country's laws. In that way, some social-contract theorists claim that your continued voluntary presence in a country, and your enjoyment of its privileges and protections, constitutes your assent to a social contract by which you agree to obey the government and to be taxed to support its activities.

Hume rejected this argument, however, for two reasons. First: "Should it be said, that, by living under the dominion of a prince, which one might leave, every individual has given a *tacit* consent to his authority, and promised him obedience; it may be answered, that such an implied consent can only have place, where a man imagines, that the matter depends on his choice" (EMPL: 475). In other words, we can consider a person to have given consent to something only when she believed she had a choice. If one does not believe one has a choice, or if it never even occurs to one that a choice is possible, then it is fatuous to claim that one has made a choice. It is like speaking one's native tongue. Did you or I consent to speak in English, for example? Is the fact that people in Britain or the United States continue to speak in English evidence that they voluntarily chose to speak in English? Hume's answer was "no": one speaks one's native tongue as an unchosen matter of birth, and for the vast majority of people not only was no voluntary choice made but it never would even have occurred to them that they had a choice—tacit or otherwise.

Hume's second reason for rejecting the argument that we have tacitly consented to our government by remaining in our country was in the form of an analogy. "Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artisan has a free choice to leave his country, when he knows no foreign language or manners, and lives from day to day by the small wages he acquires? We may as well assert that a man, by remaining in a vessel, freely consents to the dominion of the master;



though he was carried on board while asleep, and must leap into the ocean, and perish, the moment he leaves her” (EMPL: 475). Most people do not have the wealth, or the moral or cultural resources simply to leave their country, so it is meaningless to claim that doing so is a real option for them—and hence again fatuous to claim that by remaining in their country they have voluntarily consented to it.

### **The risks and rewards of government**

The Humean argument is, then, that a properly configured government can provide tremendous benefits to humanity. If it protects justice, or provides its citizens security in their lives and possessions, and if it enforces private voluntary contracts, associations, and promises, it can give its citizens the institutional framework needed for them to entrepreneurially seek out voluntary cooperation with others to benefit both themselves and others. This, it will turn out, is the secret for enabling commercial society, and unlocking the indefinite increases in prosperity that people in such a society can generate. To accomplish these beneficial ends, government needs to (1) protect its citizens against foreign aggression, for which it needs a military; (2) protect its citizens against domestic aggression, for which it need an impartial system of police and courts; and (3) establish clear and consistently applied rules about what constitutes property, what constitutes ownership, and what constitutes transfer of property. In this way, the properly configured government affirms “the three fundamental laws of justice, the stability of possession, its transference by consent, and the performance of promises” (T 3.2.11: 363). Hume continued: “Where possession has no stability, there must be perpetual war. Where property is not transferr’d by consent, there can be no commerce. Where promises are not observ’d, there can be no leagues nor alliances. The advantages, therefore, of peace, commerce, and mutual succour, make us extend to different kingdoms the same notions of justice, which take place among individuals” (T 3.2.11: 363).

A good government provides, therefore, considerable benefit and considerable reward to its citizens. But the machinery that a government needs to accomplish these beneficial ends are powerful and can be put to destructive ends as well. For that reason, we must remain ever vigilant about the scope of the government’s authorities, about the means available to it, and about the

people who wield those authorities. The risks of abuse are so great, in fact, that we should endorse only that governmental authority for which we judge the likely reward to outweigh the likely risk that the people in government are not the best and most moral specimens our species has to offer but the worst—that they are not saints but “knaves.” If we have a notion to propose a governmental authority, duty, responsibility, or task that would succeed only if it were run by people more moral, more knowledgeable, and more benevolent than the ordinary run of humanity, we should reconsider—because the people likely to staff governmental agencies are not the most decent, humane, and righteous among us. On the contrary. We should, therefore, ask ourselves: would we still endorse this new law, regulation, agency, bureau, office, or authority if the people running it were knaves?

The upshot of asking this question is that we will wish to configure government so that it will provide benefit despite who is in office, not in the hopes of who might be in office. A government whose primary, perhaps sole, duty is to protect us against aggression on our lives, property, and voluntary promises, is the least likely to be used as a weapon against us or to be used to benefit some at the expense of others instead of protecting the conditions in which we can all benefit together. In such an institutional framework, an innovative, entrepreneurial, and prospering commercial society will emerge, all on its own. And such a society portends not only increasing material benefit for its members, but even improvements in knowledge, manners, and morals.

How exactly could a commercial society provide such benefits? We turn to that in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

# Commercial Society

### Introduction

Hume was one of the earliest expositors and defenders of commercial society. In a series of essays, he showed that, when secured in their lives and property, people would trade, transact, exchange, partner, and associate with one another in mutually voluntary and mutually beneficial ways, generating benefit not only for them as individuals but also for their fellow citizens, for their country, and even for others in the world.

The benefits would be both economic and moral. The economic benefits would be the increasing material prosperity that commerce and trade would generate, prosperity that would benefit not just individuals whose resources to achieve their private ends would thereby increase, but also their country, which would find itself in the enviable position of having greater resources on which to call for infrastructure, for education, and for times of exigency like war.

According to Hume, however, commercial society would also encourage good morals. To Hume, this was at least as important as if not more important than the economic benefits of commercial society, significant as Hume thought those would be. The nature of a commercial society, and the way in which it gave people incentives to behave fairly toward one another, would, Hume thought, increase our sociality. It would encourage virtues like honesty and fair dealing, but it would also polish our manners, including our politeness, our punctuality, our tolerance of difference, our amiability, and our concern for others. It would soften our natural selfishness, it would diminish our antagonisms (including our ethnic, nationalistic, and religious prejudices), and it would blunt our violent tendencies and desires for war. Though it would have its own attendant vices as well, they were, Hume reckoned, more than compensated by the benefits.

For these reasons, Hume was, perhaps even more than his friend Adam Smith (who is today often regarded as the founding champion of commercial society), an enthusiastic celebrator of the coming commercial age.

### **Economic benefits of a commercial society**

In one of his first “economic” essays, “Of Commerce,” Hume argued that the “greatness of a state, and the happiness of its subjects,” are “inseparable with regard to commerce” (EMPL: 255). That is, commerce leads to both “greatness” for the country and to “happiness” for its people. How? His claim was that a powerful country can provide security to people’s lives and property, which enables them to generate wealth; at the same time, however, the only way a country can become powerful is when its people engage in commerce and enrich themselves. Hume’s claim was that commerce involves mutually voluntary transactions that are mutually beneficial; the more such beneficial transactions there are, the more prosperity is created for the parties who engage in them. When people’s lives and property are secure and they enjoy the liberty to dispose of their labour and skills, on the one hand, and the produce of their labour (or their goods and services), on the other, they naturally look for ways to increase their industry and productivity by increasing the amount of goods and services they produce. In a commercial society, then, businesses, firms, and ventures proliferate. “When a nation abounds in manufactures and mechanic arts, the proprietors of land, as well as the farmers, study agriculture as a science, and redouble their industry and attention. The superfluity, which arises from their labour, is not lost; but is exchanged with manufactures for those commodities, which men’s luxury now makes them covet” (EMPL: 261).

What happens to the increasing surplus and prosperity they thereby create? It often “goes to the maintenance of manufacturers,” or to supplying the needs and wants of labourers and their families, as well as to “the improvers of liberal arts,” including teachers, professors, artists, musicians, and so on (EMPL: 261). This process enables improvements not only in the material conditions of citizens by providing them more amply with necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, but it also expands our knowledge of science, mechanics, and engineering. Moreover, it helps furnish nonmaterial luxuries like education, literature, art, and music, which improve the souls of citizens. The increasing material

resources generated in a commercial society, therefore, improve the lives of individual citizens in many ways, both material and nonmaterial.

But suppose their country is attacked and needs to defend itself. Or suppose it needs bridges, canals, roads, or other infrastructure. These things are costly and thus require resources and capital. From where will the country get those resources and capital? From the surplus generated by commerce. In this way, commerce benefits not only the individual citizens engaged in it, but it can enable the “greatness” of the country as well. “Thus the greatness of the sovereign and the happiness of the state are, in a great measure, united with regard to trade and manufactures” (EMPL: 262). If one wants one’s country to have the resources to enable the provision of infrastructure, education, the means to defend itself from attack, and so on, Hume’s argument is that the institutions of a commercial society are the best way to achieve this goal.

What is the alternative? If we do not have a commercial society in which citizens are producing wealth and prosperity on their own, how can the state procure resources to fund things like bridges, roads, and a military? The only alternative, according to Hume, is to force citizens to work, and then to extract the resources from them. But this method is counterproductive because people will produce far less if they are forced to work than they otherwise could. If you make others work for you against their will, as opposed to letting them work for themselves and their families, they are far less motivated to work hard and be entrepreneurial and innovative, far less interested to find expedients and novel ways to increase production, and far more likely to find ways to shirk than to labour. They will do the least they possibly can. Hume writes: “It is a violent method, and in most cases impracticable, to oblige the labourer to toil, in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and family” (EMPL: 262).

By contrast, if the state protects people’s lives and property, and allows them to work, trade, and associate according to their own lights, suddenly everything changes: they become entrepreneurial, they become industrious, and they generate surpluses of all manner of goods and services. The beautiful part about this, from Hume’s perspective, is that all of this will happen naturally, if it is only allowed. Citizens will not have to be forced or mandated to work and produce; if they are secure in their lives and property, they will see how they themselves benefit from their industry, and so they will do it all on their

own. “Furnish him with manufacturers and commodities, and he will do it of himself” (EMPL: 262). If the state were then to require resources, and decide, for example, to tax people of some of the surplus wealth they have generated, this will then be much more easily borne by citizens: “Being accustomed to industry, he will think this less grievous, than if, at once, you obliged him to an augmentation of labour without any reward. [...] The greater is the stock of labour of all kinds, the greater quantity may be taken from the heap, without making any sensible alteration to it” (EMPL: 262).

Hume’s argument was thus a kind of “invisible hand” argument (though he did not use that term as Adam Smith did): in a commercial society, individuals’ self-interested motivations will lead them to engage cooperatively with others to produce more wealth and prosperity, and this will benefit not only themselves but others, even the country overall, as well.

Hume extended this argument in several other essays. In his “Of Refinement in the Arts,” he argues that in a commercial society, “industry, knowledge, and humanity” are encouraged, and these virtues are beneficial not “in private life alone: They diffuse their beneficial influence on the *public*, and render the government as great and flourishing as they make individuals happy and prosperous” (EMPL: 272). How? “The encrease and consumption of all the commodities, which serve to the ornament and pleasure of life, are advantageous to society; because, at the same time that they multiply those innocent gratifications to individuals, they are a kind of *storehouse* of labour, which, in the exigencies of state, may be turned to the public service” (EMPL: 272). So, people’s natural desires for goods and services that will improve their lives lead them to work to generate and procure commodities that increase their “pleasure of life” and supply them “innocent gratifications.” These are good things in themselves. In addition, however, they generate surplus wealth—a “storehouse of labour”—on which the society can draw when necessary.

### **Moral benefits of a commercial society**

The kind of government Hume came to recommend is what he called a republic in which citizens are allowed to own property, to buy, sell, trade, and give their property, and are otherwise generally left alone to order their lives and their

activities according to their own lights. He gave several reasons for supporting such “free states” (EMPL: 118).

First, they historically give rise to the rule of law, not of men. When citizens enjoy the freedom to dispose of their lives and property as they see fit, they develop individual identities and a robust jealousy of their freedom and independence. When they own property and enjoy the right to allocate it—when no one, not even the king, may summarily take their property without their willing consent—this circumscribes the government’s ability to tyrannize over them or act unjustly. It is one thing to command a single person, like a slave, or a single united group, like a military; when a country is made up of independent property owners, however, it is another thing altogether to try to command them all, because the would-be tyrant has to command each of them separately—a more difficult thing to do. The independence that citizens in a free republic come to enjoy leads them to demand steady and secure protections of their lives and property, and honest, fair, and impartial adjudication of disputes. This, in turn, leads them to demand known and settled laws respecting the nature of property, the causes and processes by which one may be dispossessed of it, and the mechanisms for resolving disputes. If, by contrast, all these matters were left to the discretion, or whim, of an individual person—a judge, a magistrate, or the king—then citizens would not be able to predict how secure their property might be, whether their voluntary agreements would be honoured, what might be a crime, or how a crime might be punished. To alleviate these uncertainties, and to enable them to engage in the productive activity that would improve their situations, free citizens of a republic would demand—and get—a rule of law.

The first benefit, then, of a free republic is an independence of spirit among its citizens. The second is the security that arises from the rule of law they would demand. As Hume argued, however, this security is not something such citizens would merely passively enjoy: they would *use* it. Specifically, they would use it to search entrepreneurially for new and better ways to improve their situations. Thus, this security gives rise to curiosity, exploration, and innovation, and these, in turn, give rise to improvement in both the mechanical arts and the sciences. People tinker, seek out expedients and improvements, risk new ventures, develop new tools and new methods and new ideas, and thus

expand the frontiers of human knowledge. “From law,” Hume wrote, “arises security: From security curiosity: And from curiosity knowledge” (EMPL: 118). “Great wisdom and reflexion,” then, are “refinements [that] require curiosity, security, and law. The *first* growth, therefore, of the arts and sciences can never be expected in despotic governments,” but, rather, in “free states” (EMPL: 118). Regarding, then, “the rise and progress of the arts and sciences,” Hume claimed “*the only proper Nursery of these noble plants [is] a free state*” (EMPL: 124).

There is another kind of moral refinement, however, that Hume argued is encouraged only in commercial societies—namely, sociability and “humanity.” He claimed that “*industry, knowledge, and humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages” (EMPL: 271). In the eighteenth century, luxury was considered a vice, because it connoted vanity, indulgence, and dissipation. Hume argued, however, that luxury can also be “innocent”: “if a man reserve time sufficient for all laudable pursuits, and money sufficient for all generous purposes, he is free from every shadow of blame or reproach” (EMPL: 269). A desire for luxuries can lead one to work hard to attain them; that is, it can lead one to be industrious. This industry in turn can lead one to learn new skills and trades and to develop one’s abilities, or increase one’s knowledge. “The mind acquires new vigour; enlarges its powers and faculties; and by an assiduity in honest industry, both satisfies its natural appetites, and prevents the growth of unnatural ones, which commonly spring up, when nourished by ease and idleness” (EMPL: 270).

Finally, this increasing knowledge can lead one to become “more sociable”: people in a commercial society “flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture” (EMPL: 271). The result, according to Hume: “beside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, it is impossible but that they must feel an encrease of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other’s pleasure and entertainment” (EMPL: 271). There is, then, according to Hume, a beneficial multiplier effect from commercial society, a virtuous spiral upwards:



the individual benefits both materially and morally, and his country benefits as well, again both materially and morally.

### **Commerce and greed**

Let us address an objection one might have about commercial society, namely, that a commercial society will lead people to be greedy, to focus on base material goods instead of higher, perhaps nonmaterial, goods. Hume's answer: "nor is a porter less greedy of money, which he spends on bacon and brandy, than a courtier, who purchases champagne and ortolans. Riches are valuable at all times, and to all men; because they always purchase pleasures, such as men are accustomed to, and desire: Nor can any thing restrain or regulate the love of money, but a sense of honour and virtue; which, if it be not nearly equal at all times, will naturally abound most in ages of knowledge and refinement" (EMPL: 276). So, all people, whether rich or poor, are self-interested, even "greedy"; but there are few problems in anyone's life that cannot be ameliorated by an increase in wealth. And which kind of society is it that most abounds in "knowledge and refinement"? Commercial societies.

Thus, Hume did not deny that people will be greedy in commercial societies. But he believed that people will be greedy in all societies, regardless of their institutions. So, we have no hope of eradicating greed. The best we can hope for is to channel it in less destructive, or possibly even in productive, directions. That is what Hume believed a commercial society does. By protecting people's lives and possessions, a commercial society offers only one route to satisfy one's greed: namely, enriching oneself through mutually voluntary, and thus mutually beneficial, commercial transactions. Such transactions are not zero-sum where one person gains at another's expense; instead, they are positive-sum where one person can gain only by simultaneously benefiting another. In a commercial society, each of us retains his or her opt-out option, or the right to say "no, thank you" to any proposal, offer, or request. That means that in order to execute a transaction that would benefit me, I have to offer something to you that is of sufficient value to you to make the transaction worth your while. I may be the greediest person in the world, but if I can get what I want through no other way than by offering something of value to you (that is, something that you yourself value), then my attention will inexorably be drawn,

even despite myself, to you—to your needs, your wants, your desires, your preferences, your values. In that way, my greed, though a vice, can be transformed into a relentless drive to provide you and others with benefit.

It may even turn out that the more this happens—the more time I spend thinking about others in the hopes of procuring voluntary exchanges—my selfish focus only on myself might begin to wane. I may in time come to consider others' interests as being not only something I must pay attention to in order to get what I want, but as important in their own right. In that way, I may be unwittingly drawn to soften my selfishness, and to develop what Hume called "humanity." Now, that might not happen; perhaps I am so obdurate and selfish that I can never become genuinely concerned about others.<sup>9</sup> Even in such an extreme case, a commercial society can still elicit benefit from my selfishness. But Hume's argument was that the only hope we have of encouraging people to be less selfish and more concerned for others is by regular interactions with others in which they must think about, pay respect to, and act out of regard for others' interests. And that happens, Hume claimed, only in a commercial society.

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9 Hume denied, however, that people's behaviour can always be explained only by reference to self-interest or selfishness. We all frequently act toward others out of "friendship and virtue" that is "disinterested"—interested, that is, in the good of the other, not of ourselves. Even if we receive a gratification or pleasure when we help another, Hume argued that this is not evidence of our selfishness: "I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure" (EMPL: 85-6).

## Chapter 6

# Trade, Money, and Debt

### Introduction

We have seen that according to Hume a commercial society provides several benefits. It allows people to engage in cooperative partnerships to create goods and services; it allows for increasing levels of production, which lowers the prices of goods and services, allowing more and more people the ability to procure, use, and consume them to increase the “ornament and pleasure of life”; it generates a “storehouse” of resources on which a state can draw in times of emergency; it leads people to become industrious, to increase their skills and knowledge, and to become more refined and sociable. In all these ways, commerce can improve society. Hume argues that we should therefore advocate a government that neither prevents commerce nor destroys the natural incentives people have to engage cooperatively with one another in a search to improve their lives and conditions.

Hume’s support for markets, trade, and commerce were almost unqualified, and he made these arguments before Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*. But Hume also made groundbreaking contributions to our understanding of economic policy matters like the balance of trade, the role of money and the use of currency, the role of prices, the role of interest, and public credit.

### Trade and money

Hume was an early and unapologetic defender of free trade. He opposed tariffs, trade restrictions, monopoly trade charters, and any other measure that prevented or imposed costs on anyone who wanted to trade with anyone else. He regarded trade to be one of the main vehicles through which people could improve their lives, and through which countries could prosper. In making his

case for free trade, he developed several important ideas that later economists would expand and incorporate as settled parts of their discipline. Among these ideas were that voluntary trade was positive-sum, not zero-sum; that wealth consisted in consumable goods and services, not in gold coins; and that different people and countries enjoyed what later economists would call comparative advantage, which, if exploited, could lead to mutual gains. Let us consider these in turn.

Hume began his essay “Of the Balance of Trade” with these words: “It is very usual, in nations ignorant of the nature of commerce, to prohibit the exportation of commodities, and to preserve among themselves whatever they think valuable and useful. They do not consider, that, in this prohibition, they act directly contrary to their intention” (EMPL: 308). Prohibitions on trade, as well as other restrictions like tariffs, are intended to protect the interests of countries, but Hume claimed they arise from “ignorance in the nature of commerce” (EMPL: 309). Hume argued that such policies in fact make two errors: first, they are based on the false assumption that trade is zero-sum, instead of positive-sum; second, they are based on the false assumption that wealth consists in “gold and silver,” instead of consisting in increased resources to use and consume (EMPL: 283).

If one country conquers another and appropriates its land, property, or other resources, that is an example of a zero-sum exchange. The conquering country enriches itself, but it does so at the expense of the other country. If I take your land, I gain the land, but you lose it. The gain to me is proportional to the loss to you: a transfer from you to me constitutes no net increase in land or other resources. It is thus a “zero-sum” exchange. By contrast, if an exchange or transaction is mutually voluntary, each party to it must gain (or, at least, believe it gains), or they would not have done it. Such transactions, then, are not “zero-sum” but “positive-sum”: a gain to me *and* a gain to you entails a net overall gain. If British citizens buy wine from France, they send gold and silver to France and they get the wine from France. Assuming both the British and the French did this voluntarily, each side to the transaction got what it wanted: the French got the gold and silver, and the British got the wine. It is a win–win, or positive-sum transaction.

Suppose, however, that the British believed wealth to consist not in goods and services but in the gold or silver itself. In that case, if British citizens bought wine from France and sent their gold or silver to France, then France (the British would believe) would be enriching itself and Britain would be impoverishing itself, because gold and silver goes from Britain to France. Thus, Britain might be inclined to put tariffs on goods imported from France to discourage British citizens from buying French wine. If France believed the same thing about wealth—that it consists in gold or silver—then it might impose tariffs on British goods to discourage French citizens from buying from the British. The result would be mutual disincentives to trade. But that would mean that it would be harder for both British citizens and French citizens to get what they want, what they believe would improve their situations. Both countries would maintain their reserves of gold and silver, but people cannot eat gold or silver. They cannot build houses or roads or bridges or schools or hospitals with gold and silver, but with the materials and labour that gold and silver buy. This exposes the fallacy: gold and silver are not valuable in themselves,<sup>10</sup> but rather because of what goods and services they enable people to procure. Thus, it is the goods and services that matter, not the gold and silver. If, therefore, we care about people improving their situations, or about our country having the resources it needs for infrastructure or in times of emergency, then what we should care about is enabling people to increase overall prosperity through increasing the goods and services at their disposal to use or consume.

Gold and silver, then, have no (or very little) value in themselves. Their value is instead instrumental, comprised by their ability to procure goods and services. That exposes another economic fallacy, Hume contends, related to the rates of currency. If we were to believe (fallaciously) that wealth consists in gold and silver itself, we might wish simply to possess ever more gold and silver. Suppose we found a cache of gold in our country; would that make our country richer? No, it would not, Hume argued: “suppose, that all the money of Great Britain were multiplied fivefold in a night, must not the contrary effect follow? Must not all labour and commodities rise to such an exorbitant height, that no neighbouring nations could afford to buy from us; while their commodities, on the other hand, became comparatively so cheap, that, in spite of all the laws

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10 The exception to this is when gold and silver are used to make jewelry or other products.

which could be formed, they would be run in upon us, and our money flow out; till we fall to a level with foreigners, and lose that great superiority of riches, which had laid us under such disadvantages?” (EMPL: 311–12). If we suddenly increased our country’s money supply, in other words, domestic prices would rise proportionately. This would constitute no gain to us in our country, because it would not constitute an increase in the supply of goods and services. And if other countries had no similar increase in their money supply, the prices of their goods and services would decrease relative to ours; in that case, our citizens would buy from them, inducing our citizens to send gold and silver to them to procure the goods and services we want. All of this points, again, to the conclusion that what matters are the goods and services, not the gold and silver. What we should care about, then, according to Hume, is the quantity of goods and services, not the quantity of gold and silver.

Yet virtually every country’s leaders not only prize possessing gold and silver, but they frequently increase the money supply as well. Why? One reason is that they believe that gold and silver are valuable, instead of the goods and services they can buy. But there is another reason. If any individual—you or I, or the Crown—suddenly comes to possess a large increase in gold or silver, eventually prices of commodities will calibrate to the larger supply of money. But it does not happen instantaneously: “though the high price of commodities be a necessary consequence of the encrease of gold and silver, yet it follows not immediately upon that encrease: but some time is required before the money circulates through the whole state, and makes its effect be felt on all ranks of people” (EMPL: 286). There is, in other words, a time lag, or “interval of intermediate situation” (EMPL: 286), during which the first possessors of the new gold and silver can buy more commodities at the prior, low prices, constituting an artificially high gain to themselves, before prices rise in reflection of the increased money supply. If they act quickly, they can thus exploit this time lag. The increased money supply will raise the price of goods and services eventually, but in the meantime the first possessors can enrich themselves at the expense of other producers and citizens, who are still selling based on the prior supply of money.

“There is always an interval,” Hume wrote, “before matters be adjusted to their new situation; and this interval is as pernicious to industry, when gold and

silver are diminishing, as it is advantageous when those metals are encreasing” (EMPL: 288). “All augmentation [of the money supply] has no other effect than to heighten the price of labour and commodities”; in “the progress toward these changes, the augmentation may have some influence, by exciting industry; but after the prices are settled, suitably to the new abundance of gold and silver, it has no manner of influence” (EMPL: 296). Thus, in the long run, increasing the amount of gold and silver has no effect on the actual condition of people’s prosperity; in the short run, however, it can benefit those—like the pirate, the buccaneer, or the Crown—who first get the increase. Yet because actual prosperity can “proceed from the encrease of industry and commerce, not of gold and silver,” the first-possessors are enriching themselves by exploiting others’ ignorance of the increase in gold and silver, procuring resources beyond what the actual state of commodities would allow, and thus impoverishing others as a result.

The best money policy, then, according to Hume, is to have a stable supply of currency, so that no one can exploit others with sudden increases or decreases, and to turn our attention to the goods and services themselves instead of to the money supply.

### **Mutual advantage and comparative advantage**

As we saw, a consequence of the false belief that wealth consists in gold and silver is often the imposition of tariffs on foreign goods and other restrictions on trade. Another motivation for such policies, Hume argued, is nationalistic prejudice and hatred of other countries. “Our jealousy and our hatred of FRANCE are without bounds,” Hume wrote of the British, and that led the British to be interested not only in themselves prospering but in the French becoming impoverished. Such nationalism can lead us to prefer to enrich ourselves through zero-sum policies, instead of positive-sum policies where we both benefit. But this is a short-sighted policy that will eventually limit our own prosperity as well as that of other countries. In “Of the Jealousy of Trade,” Hume wrote: “Nothing is more usual, among states which have made some advances in commerce, than to look on the progress of their neighbours with a suspicious eye, to consider all trading states as their rivals and to suppose that it is impossible for any of them to flourish, but at their expense” (EMPL: 328).

This is an example of the zero-sum fallacy, which assumes that the only way for one person, group, society, or country to benefit is at the expense of some other person, group, society, or country. That belief is as common as it is false. There is indeed another way to benefit: by mutually voluntary cooperative association with another in which *both* parties benefit. Hume called the belief in a zero-sum fallacy a “narrow and malignant opinion” (EMPL: 328). To the contrary, Hume argued, “the encrease of riches and commerce in any one nation, instead of hurting, commonly promotes the riches and commerce of all its neighbours”; moreover, “a state can scarcely carry its trade and industry very far, where all the surrounding states are buried in ignorance, sloth, and barbarism” (EMPL: 328).

What Hume realized was that hatred of other countries had multiple negative effects. First, it encouraged animosity and conflict with other countries, which could often lead to violence and destruction. Second, it could limit the ability of the citizens of one’s own country to improve their own situations by capitalizing on the labour and skills, and goods and services, of the citizens of other countries. In other words, in the long run it would hurt us too, not just them. “Were our narrow and malignant politics to meet with success, we should reduce all our neighbouring nations to the same state of sloth and ignorance that prevails in MOROCCO and the coast of BARBARY. But what would be the consequence? They could send us no commodities: They could take none from us: Our domestic commerce itself would languish for want of emulation, example, and instruction: And we ourselves should soon fall into the same abject condition, to which we had reduced them” (EMPL: 331).

By contrast, what would benefit us is allowing wide scope of liberty to buy and sell, to trade and associate, to hire and partner—including with people from other religions, other ethnicities, and other countries. Hume concluded with a powerful exhortation: “I shall therefore venture to acknowledge, that, not only as a man, but as a BRITISH subject, I pray for the flourishing commerce of GERMANY, SPAIN, ITALY, and even FRANCE itself” (EMPL: 331). Even France! We may care only about our own prosperity, or, more generously, we may care about that of other countries as well; either way, however, the policy prescription is the same: free trade. A generous spirit should lead us to be concerned for the well-being of other countries in addition to our own. Even if we cannot



overcome our animosities toward other countries, however, then wanting to serve even only our own interests should enable us to see that putting aside our hatreds will enable us to make far better lives for ourselves than if we indulged our prejudices and enacted restrictive trade policies.

Hence, free trade, according to Hume, is of mutual benefit, and is a surer way for a person or a country to prosper than by restricting or closing off opportunities to cooperate with other people or countries. In making his argument, however, Hume added another insight that does not become fully appreciated by political economists until the nineteenth century: what is now called “comparative advantage.”<sup>11</sup> Hume wrote: “Nature, by giving a diversity of geniuses, climates, and soils, to different nations, has secured their mutual intercourse and commerce” (EMPL: 329). People have differing skills, abilities, and opportunities, and thus allowing for free trade and exchange among differing peoples allows them and their diversity to benefit one another. Comparative advantage is when one person, firm, group, or country can produce a good or service at a lower cost than can another person, firm, group, or country. This, in turn, gives the former the ability to produce and sell the good or service in question at a lower price. This holds even when one firm or country, say, could conceivably be better at producing any number of things than any other specific firm or country. If country A has highly skilled workers who could do any number of things well, but country B has less-skilled workers who would not be as good as A at any of those specific things, nevertheless A and B would *both* be better off if A specialized in some particular thing (or range of things), while B specialized in something else. That allows A to focus on something it can do particularly well, and to benefit from the fact that B is focusing on something it does particularly well; if A and B are allowed to trade freely, they can then both benefit from each other’s respective specializations. As Hume argued, even “when any commodity is denominated the staple of a kingdom,” nevertheless “by the encrease of industry among the neighbouring nations, the consumption of every particular species of commodity is also encreased” (EMPL: 330).

As trade and markets expand, however, and people’s wealth increases, their preferences and desires can change. Perhaps they lose a taste for English

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11 Although Smith would also hint at comparative advantage in *The Wealth of Nations*, it was David Ricardo (1772–1823) who would articulate it more fully in his 1817 *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*.

wool, and begin to prefer instead Italian silk, and this leads to decreasing demand for English wool manufacturers. Is that not a loss for England? “If the spirit of industry be preserved, it may easily be diverted from one branch to another; and the manufacturers of wool, for instance, be employed in linen, silk, iron, or any other commodities, for which there appears to be a demand” (EMPL: 330). Another way to put this is to say that in markets with free trade there will be “creative destruction,” in twentieth-century economist Joseph Schumpeter’s famous phrase. One industry may wane, but others will arise, and consumers are the gainers by getting more of what they want for increasingly lower prices. The lesson, Hume argued, is not to give any one industry special protections but instead to let people choose their vocations, and change their vocations, in response to changing demand. If the wool industry in England goes away, but other industries arise, that is not a loss to be lamented but a gain to be celebrated. If England were instead to be beholden to the success of a single industry, in that case if demand were to decrease, England would have few options and would thus suffer; if, by contrast, England had an open and decentralized market, its citizens would be able to adapt spontaneously to changes in demands, making its economy, and its pursuit of prosperity, much more robust and able to withstand changes and shocks. Hume: “any people is happier who possess a variety of manufactures, than if they enjoyed one single great manufacture, in which they are all employed. Their situation is less precarious; and they will feel less sensibly those revolutions and uncertainties, to which every particular branch of commerce will always be exposed” (EMPL: 330).

Hume’s conclusions: protect each citizen’s lives and property; allow free trade, free association, and free cooperative partnerships; and let people produce, buy, and sell however they please. This set of liberal economic policies will enable people to improve their own lives, to find lines of work that give them meaning and purpose and at the same time benefit others as well, and will allow countries to increase their real wealth—in commodities, not gold or silver—to the benefit of citizens, the country, and even other countries. Hume’s liberalism was, therefore, a humane and cosmopolitan one. It is motivated by a sincere wish to allow people to improve their situations, and it is not hampered by nationalistic or other prejudices. Hume offered free markets and free trade

as the only paths toward long-term, sustainable prosperity, not just for one group or one country, but for all.

## **Public debt**

We should mention one final economic policy that Hume discussed as it relates in particular to a growing practice in many countries in the world today—namely, the issuing of public debt to finance various government projects. Under the constraints of the liberal political order Hume endorsed, the primary duty of governments is to protect the lives and property of its citizens. This constrains government significantly, however, making it far more difficult for it to not only to wage war (particularly wars in which it is the aggressor), but to finance large-scale infrastructure or welfare programs, because it has to get permission from citizens first. Hume thought that is an asset, not a liability, of the liberal political economy he endorsed, because it limits the predation, usurpation, and adventuring to which governments are ever liable. But politicians being politicians, they chafe under these constraints to their ambitions, and so they look for ways around the constraints.

One expedient they have hit upon is to issue public debt. Hume wrote, “our modern expedient, which has become very general, is to mortgage the public revenues, and to trust that posterity will pay off the incumbrances contracted by their ancestors” (EMPL: 350). However appealing and seductive such an expedient may seem, Hume argued that it is “ruinous”: “the abuses of mortgaging are more certain and inevitable; poverty, impotence, and subjection to foreign powers” (EMPL: 350–351). We become subject to foreign powers because it is they who hold our debt, and whoever holds one’s debt has power over one: “As foreigners possess a great share of our national funds, they render the public, in a manner, tributary to them” (EMPL: 355). Moreover, public debt leads to poverty because eventually someone will have to pay off the debt, and inevitably it will be future generations who will find their incomes and wealth taxed at exorbitant rates to pay for benefits to previous generations, thereby impoverishing the later generations. Finally, public debt can render us impotent because, if our resources are owed to debtors, we have far less capital available in cases of emergency.

The incentives involved with public debt are perverse. The king or sovereign benefits from issuing debt, but, because he himself will not pay it, he faces no natural incentive not to engage excessively in it. If a private person takes on too much debt, he will go bankrupt; the prospect of such a negative consequence naturally disciplines him to be wary of too much debt. For the government, however, this natural discipline is absent. Hence, “It is very tempting to a minister to employ such an expedient [namely, issuing public debt], as [it] enables him to make a great figure during his administration, without overburthening the people with taxes, or exciting any immediate clamours against himself. The practice, therefore, of contracting debt will almost infallibly be abused, in every government” (EMPL: 352). Public debt is a way for the current administration to indulge their ambitions without themselves paying for it, and without asking current citizens to pay for it either. In fact, they can claim that it is costless, because those who would actually pay for it are not yet alive (or not yet voting).

Many today claim, however, that we need not worry about increasing national debts because we merely “owe it to ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> Hume anticipated this claim: “We have, indeed, been told, that the public is no weaker upon account of its debts; since they are mostly due among ourselves, and bring as much property to one as they take from another” (EMPL: 356). Hume argued that this is “specious” reasoning, however, because someone will still have to pay off the debt. Eventually, one of two things must happen, according to Hume: “either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation. It is impossible that they can both subsist” (EMPL: 360–361). Either the interest payments—to say nothing of the principal—will grow so large that we will be unable to keep paying, or we will have to confiscate the wealth of future generations. Either way portends financial ruin. Suppose we gamble and take the second route, raising taxes ever more to finance the increasing debt. Hume: “But our children, weary of the struggle, and fettered with incumbrances, may sit down secure, and see their neighbours oppressed and conquered; till, at last, they themselves and their creditors lie both at the mercy of the conqueror.

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12 As of this writing, Canada’s gross national debt is \$3.188 trillion, or some \$84,000 per Canadian; for context, Canada’s current gross domestic product is \$1.755 trillion. The national debt of the United States currently stands at over \$27 trillion, or some \$82,000 per American; for context, the current gross domestic product of the entire United States is \$21 trillion.

And this may properly enough be denominated the *violent death* of our public credit” (EMPL: 365).

It would also be the death of our prosperity, and that long before we would be conquered by another country or group. If to benefit ourselves today we issued so much debt that we impoverished our posterity, we are setting in motion our own “seeds of ruin” (EMPL: 357). To foresee the calamity to which this would lead requires, however, no great power of future-telling or “gift of prophecy,” Hume claimed; “in order to deliver such prophecies as these, no more is necessary, than merely to be in one’s senses, free from the influence of popular madness and delusion” (EMPL: 365).

Given the seductive allure of issuing public debt, then, the better part of wisdom is to disallow it in the first place. And the best way to do that is to restrict government within very specific limits, namely, the protection of our lives and property, and to let citizens engage in productive association and exchange that leads to increasing prosperity. They can use their increasing wealth to address progressively more of the problems they continue to face in life, and, though they will never be able to address all problems, they will thereby be enabled to continue addressing ever more of them without at the same time imperiling the process by which they are enabled to do so.

Are money and wealth the only things that matter in life, however, or the only things that government policy should address or protect? And are all preferences and desires that could be satisfied by a commercial society’s increasing wealth equally good? Let us turn to those questions in the next chapter.



# Virtue, Religion, and the End of Life

## Introduction

Two recurring criticisms of markets, trade, and the kind of commercial society that Hume advocated are, first, that they focus only on material gain, and, second, that they treat all preferences and desires as equally good, equally important, and thus equally deserving of respect. As critics point out, some preferences and desires are not, in fact, good; some are downright bad. Increasing wealth may enable people to satisfy more of their preferences and desires, but if some of those preferences and desires are themselves bad—especially those that focus only on material goods, to the exclusion of other, higher goods—why should we consider it a good thing to enable people to satisfy ever more of them? Does the Humean commercial society require us to treat all preferences and desires as equally good? Does it require us to believe that satisfying all preferences and desires should be our goal?

Hume did not believe that all preferences and desires are good. In fact, he drew clear distinctions between virtues, on the one hand, and vices, on the other. He went so far as to claim that people “who have denied the reality of moral distinctions”—that is, people who claim a moral equality among all preferences and desires, thereby eliminating any moral distinction among them—“may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants,” because, he claimed, no one “could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of everyone” (E2 1.133: 169–70). The question for Hume, then, was not whether there are moral virtues and moral vices, but,

instead, how we discern them and what their origin is—and what institutions support and encourage them.

Hume discussed the origin and nature of virtues that he put under the heading of “benevolence,” which include “affections” that are “*sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent*, or their equivalents” (E2 2.1.139: 176). He also discussed the virtue of justice, which, as we saw in chapter 3, he connected to the ideas of property and right, and which he believed arise because of the necessary role they play in the creation, order, and maintenance of civil society: “Hence the ideas of property become necessary in all civil society: Hence justice derives its usefulness to the public: And hence alone arises its merit and moral obligation” (E2 3.1.149: 188).

According to Hume, the basis of the virtue of justice, as well as the primary basis for the rest of the virtues, is utility: they count as virtues insofar as they are useful and promote our interests. But could Hume avoid the criticism that it amounts to treating all preferences and desires as equally valuable? If utility is the only thing that matters, and if the satisfaction of any (or all) preferences and desires increases utility, then it would seem to follow that the goal is to satisfy any and all preferences and desires, whatever their nature. If a main argument for commercial society is the increasing resources it generates to satisfy people’s preferences and desires, perhaps, then, so much the worse for the case for commercial society.

Hume thought his argument is not susceptible to this criticism. In this chapter, we look at how his argument could, at least according to him, avoid the criticism. Doing so will give us occasion to consider some of Hume’s claims about religion and the ultimate goals or ends of human life.

### **What makes virtues virtues?**

For all the virtues Hume classed under the heading of “benevolence”—which include “beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit” (E2 2.1.140: 178)—he argues that utility “forms, at least, a *part* of their merit, and is one source of that approbation and regard so universally paid to them” (E2 2.2.141: 179). Many in Hume’s time, as today, believed that ascribing a utilitarian element to the virtues debased them. On the contrary, Hume argued, “what praise is implied in the simple epithet *useful*!” (E2 2.2.142:



179). Creating benefit to oneself or others, or to one's society or country, are, after all, good things—hence “useful”—and it would be a mistake to discount them because they are beneficial or useful. The benevolent virtues of charity, generosity, humanity, and so on all conduce to the “happiness of mankind, the order of society, the harmony of families, [and] the mutual support of friends” (E2 2.2.144: 181–2), all of which are useful and hence good things.

If utility is only a part of the reason we approve of these virtues, however, what is the rest of the reason? Hume does not explicitly say. The remainder of his discussion of what makes virtues virtues relates to their utility and to why utility pleases us and leads to our approbation. Justice, for example, is praised and approved of solely because of its “beneficial consequences” (E2 3.1.145: 183), that is, because of its utility. The virtues of keeping one's word, of honoring one's contracts, of fidelity in a marriage, of respecting others' privacy, of fulfilling one's obligations (to one's friends, one's family, one's children, and so on), were all defended by Hume ultimately on utilitarian grounds.<sup>13</sup>

In his discussion of “Why Utility Pleases,”<sup>14</sup> Hume argued that as a matter of logic, for something to be useful it must be in “somebody's interest” (E2 5.1.177: 218). Most of the virtues of which we approve relate either directly to some benefit to ourselves (like prudence, temperance, and perseverance, for example<sup>15</sup>), or to others (like justice, generosity, or bravery in war). Sometimes, however, we approve of “virtuous actions, performed in very distant ages and remote countries; where the utmost subtilty of imagination would not discover any appearance of self-interest, or find any connexion of our present happiness and security with events so widely separated from us” (E2 5.1.175: 215–16). In such cases, Hume argued that we approve of the distant virtuous actions because they serve “the interest of those, who are served by the character or action approved of” (E2 5.1.177: 218). That meant, for Hume, that we have a concern for others' interests, even those with whom we ourselves have no connection, from which he concludes “that everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will” (E2 5.2.178: 219). He elaborated: “We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several motives of action”

13 See section 4 of the second *Enquiry* (E2: 205–211).

14 See section 5 of the second *Enquiry* (E2: 212–32).

15 See E2 6.1.199: 242–43 for a longer list.

(E2 5.2.183: 226), and we do so, Hume maintained, by a natural “sympathy” we have for our fellow creatures (E2 5.2.186: 229).

Adam Smith would develop the idea of a natural sympathy to a much greater extent in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,<sup>16</sup> but Hume’s idea seemed to be that it is one of the fixed features of human psychology that we can be moved by sympathy, or empathy, for others. Thus, when an action or behaviour positively affects others, our sympathy explains why we are “pleased” by the utility of the action or the behaviour’s effects on others, and thus explains why we approve of the action or behaviour. Once again, Hume returned to the central importance of utility: “It appears to be a matter of fact, that the circumstance of *utility*, in all subjects is a source of praise and approbation” (E2 5.2.188: 231). But Hume’s “utility” is of quite wide scope: it can pertain directly to ourselves, directly to others, directly or indirectly to society, or directly or indirectly to all of humanity.

In response, then, to the question of whether a Humean argument for markets, trade, and commercial society pertained only to material commodities, and whether it allowed any scope for a conception of moral virtue, we can now give an answer. What commercial society, and the liberal government that underpins it, allows, according to Hume, is the opportunity for each individual to pursue activities, collaborations, and partnerships with others that lead to mutual benefit. He thus endorsed a utilitarian argument to support the case for a commercial society. That did not mean, however, that Hume could not distinguish between virtues and vices, or between what we might think of as higher and lower ends, goals, or purposes. Whether an action or behaviour is conducive to utility—one’s own, that of others, or even that of all humanity—is, ultimately, an empirical question, and thus a question of fact. So, Hume’s argument was that virtues pertain to actual utility, to actual benefit along all these margins or at all these levels; whether something actually benefits a person or society or humanity can be ascertained empirically, and to the extent that it does, it will be actual utility that underlies it.

To take one of Hume’s examples, sobriety is a virtue (E2 6.1.199: 243). We can know it is a virtue not because we need a metaphysical argument or because we consulted God’s will, however, but because lack of sobriety is

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16 For discussion, see Otteson, 2018, ch. 2.

destructive of utility, either of the individual or of others or both. For Hume, then, utility anchors and provides objective standards for virtue, and because it underlies moral values, it cannot be separated from morality. And neither can the argument for commercial society: for Hume, its utilitarian benefits included moral benefits as well.

## Religion

During his lifetime, Hume was taken to be a skeptic, which was believed to be tantamount to being an atheist. There were several reasons he was viewed this way. First and most obviously, he called himself a skeptic. Second, his discussion of the powers of human knowledge limited our ability to know about matters of fact and existence to only those things we could observe—which would seem to preclude us from knowing anything about God. Third, in 1757 he published an extended essay called *The Natural History of Religion*, which, while initially claiming that “no rational enquirer can” deny that the “whole frame of nature bespeaks an Intelligent Author,” goes on to suggest that the particulars of people’s religious beliefs vary depending largely on historical and contingent circumstances, not on the apprehension of any universal reality.

In the last few years of his life, Hume also worked on an extended essay he had first composed in the 1750s called *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. He did not publish it during his lifetime, however; it first appeared the year after his death, in 1777. The reasons he chose not to publish it while he was alive probably relate to the outcry he knew it would cause. For in the *Dialogues*, one of the characters, Philo, systematically dismantles one of the main arguments widely held then, and today, to support belief in the existence of God, namely, the Design Argument. Hume put the Design Argument in the words of another of the main characters of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated

them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. (D pt. 2: 15)

This argument purports to provide empirical evidence for the existence of God. If we went to a remote island, and found a watch on the beach, we would infer that a human being had been there, since watches do not spontaneously occur in nature; the design of the watch implies a watchmaker with rationality, that is, a human being. Similarly, the design evident in the world implies a Worldmaker with rationality, that is, God.

The character Philo in the *Dialogues*, however, has a very different take on the Design Argument:

If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea we must form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel when we find him a stupid mechanic who imitated others, and copied an art which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out; much labor lost; many fruitless trials made; and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world-making. (D pt. 5: 36)

Philo's argument, in other words, is that looking at the design of the world can lead us to very different conclusions than a belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God. Thus, the Design Argument cannot take us very far, and certainly not

to any confidence in the existence of the Christian God in particular. A person looking at the world, Hume argued, “is able, perhaps, to assert or conjecture that the universe sometime arose from something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis” (D pt. 5: 37).

Subsequent generations of philosophers have taken Philo’s argument to be a decisive refutation of Cleanthes’s; they thus conclude that the character Philo must represent Hume’s own views, from which they conclude that Hume did not believe there were any *a posteriori* arguments or empirical evidence that proved God’s existence—and none proving the existence of the Christian God in particular.

That does not prove that Hume was an atheist, however. He had his doubts about the Design Argument’s ability to prove God’s existence, and he also had many criticisms to register about the corruption and malfeasance of organized religions, the Roman Catholic Church chief among them.<sup>17</sup> But he also repeatedly expressed his own belief in God. He wrote, for example, that “*superstition* and *enthusiasm*” were the chief “corruptions of true religion” (EMPL: 73); but that implies he believes there *is* a true religion. He also wrote: “There surely is a being who presides over the universe; and who, with infinite wisdom and power, has reduced the jarring elements into just order and proportion” (EMPL: 154). He even went so far as to endorse, in his essay “The Platonist” (published in 1742), his own version of the Design Argument: “Can we then be so blind as not to discover an intelligence and a design in the exquisite and most stupendous contrivance of the universe? Can we be so stupid as not to feel the warmest raptures of worship and adoration, upon the contemplation of that intelligent Being, so infinitely good and wise?” (EMPL: 158). The proper contemplation of this Being, Hume suggests, “can never be finished in time” but instead “will be the business of an eternity” (EMPL: 158).

Now, “The Platonist” was written about a decade before the first draft of the *Dialogues* and was published 35 years before the *Dialogues* were published, so perhaps Hume changed his mind in the interval. It is impossible to know for certain. In any case, Hume’s relationship to theism and Christianity

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, EMPL: 75–6.

is more complex than simply “yes” or “no.” But it is clear that Hume was not an enthusiast of religion the way many or most of his contemporaries were, and he was willing to raise some perhaps uncomfortable (for the time) questions about the sources of our religious beliefs and about how much confidence we could reasonably have in them. Questions like those perhaps befit a philosopher of a skeptical bent, if not an evangelical or proselytizing theist. But that is emblematic of Hume’s entire personality: as a skeptical philosopher, he wanted to pursue “our sifting humour” and keep asking the rational basis of our beliefs until we reached the limits of our meager capacities (E1 4.1.28: 32). And yet he allowed that “Abstruse thought and profound researches” nature would “severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries shall meet with, when communicated” (E1 1.4: 9). In light of that, Hume counseled, “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (E1 1.4: 9).

According to Hume, then, there are virtues and there are vices, but their nature is based on contingent, empirical utility. Whether the virtues that humanity discovers and constructs also comport with God’s will, Hume seemed to believe our limited rational capacities are not given to know. That seems to suggest that if we are to be religious, we must simply have faith, and not look to empirical observations for evidence or proof. Perhaps Hume’s “true religion,” then, is fideism, or mere faith. As Hume concluded in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*: “A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity”; indeed, “To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*” (D pt. 12: 89).

# Happiness, Friendship, and Tragedy

## Introduction

Can a philosopher be happy? Hume had a lot to say about happiness throughout his writings. He also appears to have been one of the few great philosophers in history—indeed, perhaps the only one—who was both joyful and would have been a joy to be friends with. He was beloved by virtually everyone he met, and though many disliked his ideas—in particular his religious skepticism—it appears that everyone who met or spent time with him enjoyed the experience.<sup>18</sup> Hume was witty, sharp, incisive, and provocative without being belligerent. He was an excellent conversationalist, was frequently invited to attend dinner parties throughout his adult life, and was widely sought-after as an acquaintance and guest. Even those who objected to his alleged irreligiosity admitted that it was hard to hate him as a person, even if you hated his ideas. The French indeed called him “le bon David.”<sup>19</sup>

By all appearances, then, he was happy, lived life to its fullest, and enjoyed the company of others. And yet, he suffered one disappointment after another. His first great work, the *Treatise of Human Nature*, “fell dead-born from the press” and went largely ignored; he twice sought university professorships and was twice denied; he fell in love but never married and had no children; he frequently suffered from painful gout and kidney stones, and during

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18 One notable exception was the time Hume spent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who, in his paranoia, decided Hume was part of a conspiracy against him. This is no doubt more a reflection of Rousseau, however, than of Hume. See Rasmussen, 2017, ch. 7 for a discussion of this notorious falling-out. See also Hocutt, 2003 for a trenchant discussion of Rousseau.

19 See Mossner, 1943.

the last several years of his life endured an exhausting and debilitating dysentery; and, what must surely have been the most painful to him, he suffered one disappointment after another from perhaps his single best friend, Adam Smith. And the disappointments from Smith culminated in a final disappointment, even betrayal, right at the end of Hume's life.

## Happiness

"The great end of all human industry," Hume wrote, "is the attainment of happiness. For this were arts invented, sciences cultivated, laws ordained, and societies modelled, by the most profound wisdom of patriots and legislators" (EMPL: 148). Hume seemed to accept the view of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) that happiness, or *eudaimonia*, was the ultimate end of all human action, the final goal for the sake of which we do everything else, but which we pursue for no other goal than to achieve it itself. Hume's argument was that we pursue the arts, science, and industry, and we frame our political and economic institutions, ultimately with the goal of allowing, enabling, and encouraging people to lead truly flourishing, happy, or eudaimonic lives. Or at least we should. But this requires us to have some idea about what a eudaimonic life is.

One aspect of the pursuit of eudaimonia, according to Hume, is work. He believed that happiness cannot be merely bestowed upon a person like a gift, but, rather, is something one must work for and achieve. It is, in fact, hard work. It requires an assessment of one's skills, abilities, and values; a reckoning of the opportunities one has, the obligations and responsibilities one has, and the constraints one faces; and it requires a personal commitment to order and engage one's life's activities to enable the chance of attaining eudaimonia. But perhaps one worries about the hard work this would require. If achieving eudaimonia is hard, and its prospects unfortunately uncertain, is the pursuit worth it? Hume captured this worry by asking: "shall that labour and attention, requisite to the attainment of thy end [of happiness], ever seem burdensome and intolerable?" (EMPL: 149). Hume's answer: "Know, that this labour itself is the chief ingredient of the felicity to which thou aspires, and that every enjoyment soon becomes insipid and distasteful, when not acquired by fatigue and industry" (EMPL: 149). Happiness, Hume said, is like a prey that a hunter



seeks, but a prey that “flies from his pursuit, or defends itself from his violence” (EMPL: 149). It takes work, strategy, flexibility, patience, perseverance, and industry to achieve. Only after such hard work and much concerted effort can its attainment provide genuine happiness, “felicity,” or eudaimonia.

According to Hume, however, it is not only hard work that is required: it must be hard work in the service of ends that are worthy of pursuit. Hume claimed that “the happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*; or, in other words, that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steels the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our own thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasures of society and conversation, than to those of the senses” (EMPL: 168). Part of the work that is required to achieve our ultimate end of happiness, then, is a ranking of our values, including our moral values. We determine what is most valuable to us, what is second-most-valuable to us, and so on down the line. Because our resources are limited, we cannot, alas, achieve everything we want. We have to determine what tradeoffs we are willing to make, or what lower-ranked values we are willing to give up to enable us to achieve higher-ranked values; and we have to make sure that our ranking of values corresponds to our considered judgment about what virtue requires. Only in this way can we ensure we are putting ourselves in the best possible position to achieve, not mere pleasure or contentment, but genuine happiness, or eudaimonia.

Hume modeled these claims in his own life. He worked hard, producing, as we have seen, a large body of philosophical writing about an enormous range of topics—everything from metaphysics and epistemology to psychology and moral theory, to political economy and economics, to a history of England, to the history of religion, to aesthetics and a proposed standard of judgment for works of art. One theme that runs throughout Hume’s work is his desire not only to achieve happiness for himself, but to demonstrate for others what a truly happy and virtuous life is, and to recommend public institutions that could enable its attainment for ever more people. Hume’s recommendation of a liberal political order and a market-based commercial society were motivated by this noble and generous aim of learning from history and empirical observation

what could constitute a virtuous and happy life for human beings as they are actually constructed and given the actual constraints they face.

## Friendship

One aspect of the above quotations bears emphasis. Hume wrote that happiness “inclines us rather to the pleasure of society and conversation” (EMPL: 168), and he believed that friendship—true friendship—is an indispensable element of a virtuous and thus happy life. Elsewhere Hume recommended “the study of the beauties, either of poetry, eloquence, music, or painting” because they “draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited to love and friendship” (EMPL: 7). Hume repeatedly spoke of “the delicate pleasure of disinterested love and friendship” (EMPL: 169); he warned against jealousy, which “excludes men from all intimacies and familiarities with each other” and cautions that no one wants to be friends with a jealous person (EMPL: 184–5); and he told us that “*friendship* is a calm and sedate affection, conducted by reason and cemented by habit; springing from long acquaintance and mutual obligations; without jealousies or fears, and without those feverish fits of heat and cold, which cause such an agreeable torment in the amorous passion” (EMPL: 189).

True friendship, for Hume, involves a mutual concern for the good of each other, something that can arise only from “habit” and “long acquaintance and mutual obligations.” Hume’s repeated caution that jealousy can destroy friendship indicates that, for him, a true friend is a person who delights and finds joy in one’s virtue and accomplishments, who does not resent one’s successes, and who suffers along with one in one’s pains and failures. The ability to fully sympathize with another requires a thorough understanding of the other, something that can arise only from spending time with one another, getting to know one another well, and developing a genuine concern for one another’s well-being.

As I mentioned, Hume modeled this behaviour in his own life, and he was able to develop some deep and lasting friendships. After Hume’s death, Adam Smith wrote: “Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly

wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.”<sup>20</sup> High praise—indeed, such high praise that Smith was criticized for suggesting that a known skeptic and possible atheist could possibly warrant it when the consensus at the time was that only a Christian could be truly moral and virtuous. Yet Smith’s estimation that Hume approached the ideal of being a “perfectly wise and virtuous man” suggests that, by Hume’s argument, Hume should have been deeply happy.

## Tragedy

I dwell on this because it seems surprising given the number of devastating disappointments Hume experienced in his life. And one cannot help but wonder whether Hume’s greatest disappointment was the many occasions on which his friends—and in particular his best friend, Adam Smith—failed him. Hume heaped praise on Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and on his *Wealth of Nations*. Regarding the former, Hume wrote, with a raillery that bespeaks their friendship: “I proceed to tell you the melancholy news, that your book has been very unfortunate; for the public seem disposed to applaud it extremely” (HL1: 305). Regarding the latter, Hume wrote: “Euge! Belle! Dear Mr Smith: I am much pleas’d with your Performance” (HL2: 311). Smith, however, did not return the favor with any of Hume’s writings. Smith alluded to Hume several times in his writings, and named him in a few places, but there is a great gap between Hume’s praise and encouragement of Smith’s work and Smith’s of Hume’s. Hume expressed regret that the positions he took might damage Smith’s reputation; he wrote to Smith: “it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends” (HL1: 314). Hume repeatedly entreated Smith to visit him, and he even schemed to find excuses for Smith to live or work closer to Hume—but to no avail.

Perhaps the coup de grace, however, was that Smith refused Hume’s dying request that Smith publish Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* upon his death. Some have judged this refusal to be a stain on Smith’s character, though there are reasons to soften a negative judgment. The timing was bad: Hume died only months after Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published, and if Smith thereupon published Hume’s *Dialogues*, which was certain to create

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20 Smith to William Strahan, 9 Nov. 1776 (Smith, 1987: 221).

an outcry and renewed accusations of skepticism and atheism, it might have affected both the sales of *The Wealth of Nations* and Smith's own scholarly reputation. Moreover, when Smith informed Hume of his reservations, Hume immediately relieved Smith of the burden of publishing the *Dialogues* (he said he would ask his nephew to do it), and Hume continued to treat Smith with respect and friendship. And, as we saw, after Hume died, Smith published the open letter claiming that Hume approached "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."<sup>21</sup>

Still, one cannot read Hume's correspondence with Smith regarding not only this issue but several others over decades of their friendship and not be struck by its lopsidedness: Hume's letters demonstrate that he considered Smith a dear friend in a deep, Aristotelian sense, while Smith's correspondence, on the whole, is both less frequent and less friendly. And Hume time and again entreated, even begged, Smith to visit him, write to him, and speak with him, while Smith again and again unaccountably simply did not. It is hard not to sympathize with Hume, and to wonder how he managed to maintain his characteristic cheerfulness when he had every reason to abandon it, how he managed to be generous and magnanimous toward others, even those whose disappointments were best positioned to cut him deeply.

Smith reported that in the days before his death, Hume joked about how he would attempt to distract Charon, the mythical ferryman who takes people across the river Styx to Hades, in an effort to delay the trip Charon would take Hume on (Smith, 1987: 219). Though Hume was by this point too weak even to rise from his bed, he nevertheless maintained his wit, humor, and sanguinity about his impending end. Regardless, then, of how the world—including his closest friends—treated him, Hume approached life with a vitality, with a seriousness of purpose tempered by a light-hearted sense of good humor, and a continuing desire to find joy in the world and communicate that joy to others.

Hume was thus a true friend, not only to those lucky enough to count themselves among his friends, but to philosophy, literature, history, virtue, and to all the world's inhabitants he did not know but whose nature he sought to understand and whose happiness he sincerely wished to promote. He was thus

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21 My speculation is that Smith wrote this effusive praise of Hume upon Hume's death in part to assuage the guilt Smith felt from the knowledge that he never fully reciprocated, or even appreciated, Hume's friendship.

both a brilliant philosopher and a great and generous soul. Perhaps one might dare to hope he also achieved eudaimonia.



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### **For further reading**

There is a large literature on virtually all aspects of Hume's life and writings. Below is but a small sample. (Those marked by an asterisk are at a more advanced level.)

Ayer, A.J. (2000). *Hume: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

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