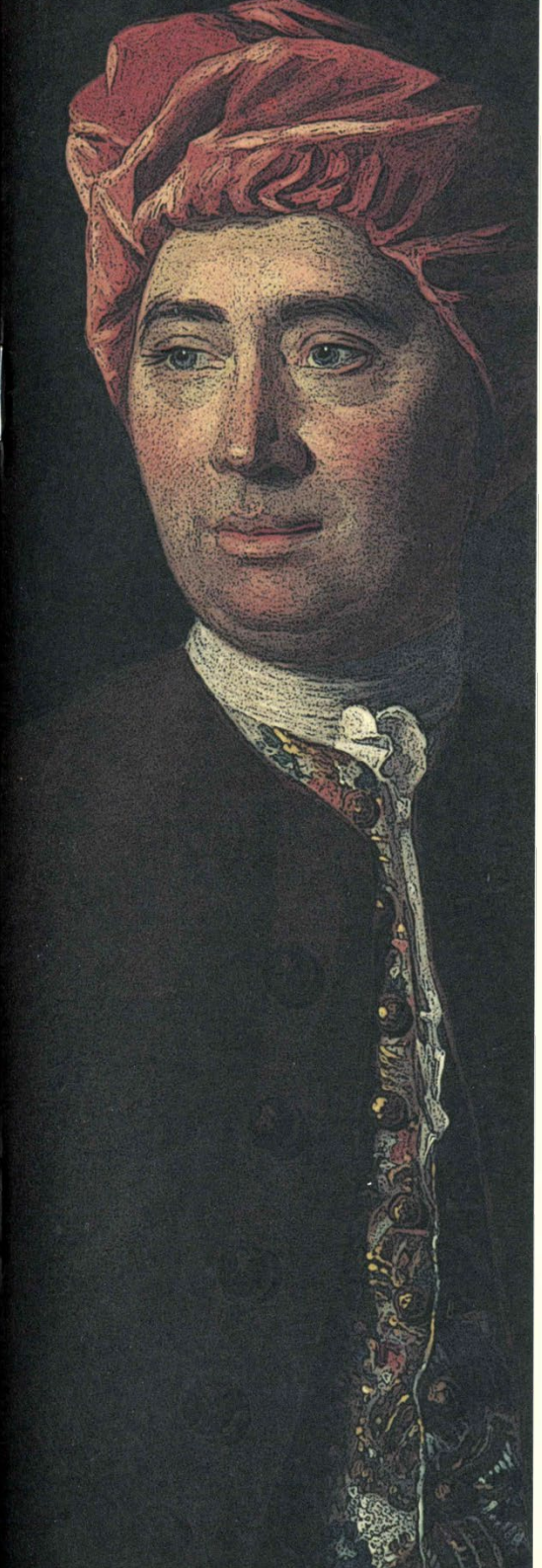

Dialogues with Hume

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Hume's Intellectual Development: an overview

James Harris

Celebrating Hume's Tercentenary

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711, attended the University of Edinburgh from 1723, and died in Edinburgh in 1776, having meanwhile achieved worldwide fame as an historian and philosopher. He and his associates were at the heart of the intellectual, literary and cultural events that are now known as the Scottish Enlightenment and he is generally recognised as the greatest philosopher ever to write in English. Today his work is studied by scholars from all over the world. Although Hume wrote in the 18th century, his works continue to be influential across many fields of scholarship and remain uncommonly relevant to the philosophical disputes of the 21st century and a wide range of current public concerns. It is fitting, therefore, that the 300th anniversary of his birth should be celebrated in Edinburgh in 2011 and the University of Edinburgh is hosting a programme of events throughout the year. As part of this, IASH has organised a series of seminars entitled Dialogues with Hume as follows:

Emeritus Professor Peter Jones (University of Edinburgh):
Conversation: And the Reception of David Hume

Gathering Uncertainties: A conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Professor Susan Manning.

Professor Daniel Schulthess (University of Neuchâtel):
Hume and Searle – the 'is/ought' gap vs. speech act theory

Dr. James Harris (University of St. Andrews):
Hume's intellectual development – an overview

A dialogue between Professor Don Garrett (New York University and Carnegie Centenary Professor, IASH) and Dr. Peter Millican (Hertford College, Oxford and Illumni Hume Fellow, IASH) on:
Reason, Induction, and Causation in Hume's Philosophy.

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Abstract

Is there, or is there not, some way in which Hume's contributions to the theory of human nature, to the philosophy of religion, to political science, to political economy, and to history can be construed as having been all part of some single project? If not, then how is Hume's career as a man of letters to be characterized and understood? James Harris argues that two ways of answering these questions are mistaken. The nineteenth century was wrong to think of Hume as having after the *Treatise* abandoned philosophy in the pursuit of fame and wealth. More recent Hume scholarship is wrong to move to the opposite extreme in asserting that the concerns of the *Treatise* set the agenda for all of Hume's subsequent works. Harris suggests that there is a significant difference between the Hume of the *Treatise* and the Hume of the *Essays*, the *Political Discourses* and the *History of England*, but this difference should not be characterized in terms of a move from 'philosophy' to something else. Rather, it is a move from one kind of philosophy to another – or, better still, from one kind of philosophy to a number of other kinds.

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As is well known, Hume published his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* before he turned thirty. As is equally well known, he was disappointed with the reception that the *Treatise* met with. Projected additional volumes on 'politics' and on 'criticism' never materialized. A year after the appearance of Book Three of the *Treatise,* in 1741, Hume published a first volume of *Essays, Moral and Political.* A second volume came out a year later. For the next ten years Hume wrote – or at least published – only in the essay form. In 1748 he brought out *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding,* a recasting of what Hume regarded as the principal arguments of Book One of the *Treatise.* A recasting of Book Three of the *Treatise, An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, was published in 1751. It was followed a year later by *Political Discourses,* Hume's principal contribution to political economy. The first of many editions of Hume's collected works, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects,* came out in 1753. *Four Dissertations,* a miscellaneous collection of essays, appeared in 1757. The 1750s were, however, dominated by the writing of a history of England stretching from the first Roman invasion to the revolution of 1688. As one of his critics put it, Hume wrote his history as witches say their prayers: backwards. He began in the seventeenth century, with a volume on James I and Charles I in 1754, and a volume on Charles II and James II in 1757. Then came the Tudors, in two volumes published in 1759; and finally, in 1762, two further volumes covering everything from 55 BC to 1485. Also in 1762 Hume published a complete edition of his *History of England.* He then spent the final fourteen years of his life correcting and polishing the *History* and the *Essays and Treatises* – and grew rich as he did so. If the *Treatise,* as Hume put it in a phrase stolen from Pope, 'fell *dead-born from the Press*' [Hume 17 77, pp. 7-8], there was compensation in the fame and admiration garnered by his *History* and his *Essays.* A lack of appetite

for inevitable controversy caused Hume to leave his *Dialogues on Natural Religion,* written in the early 1750s, to be published after his death. The first question for an intellectual biographer of Hume, and the question I want to pursue here today, is how to make sense of the multiplicity of Hume's interests. Is there, or is there not, some way in which his contributions to the theory of human nature, to the philosophy of religion, to political science, to political economy, and to history can be construed as having been all part of some single project? If not, then how is Hume's career as a man of letters to be characterized and understood?

– 2 –

I shall begin with a conception of Hume's intellectual development that appears to have been widespread, in Britain at least, for a hundred years or so after Hume's death. On this view, the most important event in Hume's intellectual biography was the first one: the publication of the *Treatise.* To be more precise, what was of critical significance to Hume's early readers was the writing of Book One of the *Treatise,* 'Of the Understanding'. From Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart and on through the nineteenth century it was claimed that what Hume had done in Book One of the *Treatise* was to take Lockean empiricism as far as it could go, showing in the process the manner in which such empiricism collapses into complete scepticism. T. H. Grose, co-editor with T. H. Green of the first edition of Hume's works to include the *Treatise,* declared himself 'struck by the suddenness with which [Hume's] labours in philosophy came to an end' [Hume 1907 (1875), vol. 1, p. 75]. The explanation was that 'Hume had brought his criticism of the philosophy of experience to a point, where, as he saw clearly, negation had done its work, and either he must leave the subject, or else attempt a reconstruction' [p. 76]. Having neither the disposition nor, Grose suspected, the ability for the latter, Hume succumbed to his

self-confessed desire for literary fame, and devoted himself to doing all he could to excite public attention. Grose wrote that 'Few men of letters have been at heart so vain and greedy of fame as was Hume' [p. 36]. The Green and Grose edition of Hume's works appeared in 1874 and 1875, and by this point in the nineteenth century it was plain, at least to some, that Hume had taken British philosophy to its furthest possible point of development. There could be no more philosophy without the revolution dimly prefigured in Reid, properly initiated by Kant, and completed by Hegel. Having grasped the nature of the situation he had reasoned himself into, Hume himself turned away from philosophy to purely empirical questions in morals and politics, questions which he found to be ultimately historical in character. In *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century,* published in 1876, Leslie Stephen claimed that 'the moral which Hume naturally drew from his philosophy was the necessity of turning entirely to experience. Experience, and experience alone, could decide questions of morality or politics, and Hume put his theory into practice when he abandoned speculation to turn himself to history' [Stephen 1962 (1876), vol. 1, p. 48].

The idea that in his philosophy Hume was purely negative, a destroyer not a constructor, was held not only by opponents of empiricism, such as Green and Grose and Stephen, but also by its advocates. John Stuart Mill, for example, described Hume in his essay on Bentham as 'the profoundest negative thinker on record', as 'a man, the peculiarities of whose mind qualified him to detect failure of proof, and want of logical consistency' – but also prevented him from establishing anything in the way of truth. Instead, Hume devoted himself only to showing 'that the *pro* and *con* of everything may be argued with infinite ingenuity' [Mill 1969 (1838), p. 80]. For Mill, Hume was insufficiently serious. He was 'the prince of *dilettanti*' [p. 80 n]. T. H. Huxley, too, regretted Hume's lack of application. Hume saw clearly through to what Huxley held to be the truth: that 'philosophy is based upon psychology; and that the inquiry into the contents and operations of the mind must be conducted

upon the same principles as a physical investigation, if ... the "moral philosopher" would attain results of as firm and definite a character as the "natural philosopher"' [Huxley 1879, pp. 52-53]. Yet Hume also exhibited 'no small share of the craving after mere notoriety and vulgar success, as distinct from the pardonable, if not honourable, ambition for solid and enduring fame, which would have harmonised better with his philosophy'; and so after the *Treatise* he gradually forsook 'philosophical studies', and turned to 'those political and historical topics which were likely to yield, and did in fact yield, a much better return of that sort of success which his soul loved' [p. 11]. According to Mill and Huxley, then, and according also to Green and Grose and Stephen, Hume's intellectual development is marked above all by a turn away from 'philosophy'. Whether one took philosophy properly so called to be Hegelian in character, as Green and Grose and Stephen did, or to be an empirical science continuous with psychology, as Mill and Huxley did, Hume failed as a philosopher. Hume therefore moved on from philosophy to quite different kinds of writing, motivated by the desire for public controversy, fame, and money, or, as on Stephen's more generous construal, because he held that an experientially-grounded enquiry into morality and politics was the only thing his scepticism left worth believing in.

It has become a truism of Hume studies that there is no need to suppose a radical discontinuity between Book One of the *Treatise* and what Hume wrote subsequently. No one these days asserts that Hume's philosophy is to be found in his first book only, and that everything else he wrote was born of a desire for fame and money. On the contrary, the mainstream view now in Hume scholarship is that there is a fundamental unity to Hume's writings, and that this unity can be spelled out in terms of how the later works can be read as extensions and continuations of the project initiated in the *Treatise*. That project is taken to be predominantly positive and constructive in character, a 'science of man', to use Hume's own words, that was not

abandoned when the *Treatise* was abandoned, but was, rather, continued in a number of different forms: in essays, dissertations, discourses, and narrative history. This unifying trend in Hume scholarship has its source in Norman Kemp Smith's successful attempt in the early twentieth century to lay to rest the ghost of Hume as all-destroying sceptic. After Kemp Smith it became possible to see Hume as having constructive and systematic ambitions, and, even if there has been much disagreement concerning Kemp Smith's own characterization of those ambitions, the thesis that the positive theory of human nature laid out in the *Treatise* is the key to Hume's writings taken as a whole has been extremely influential. An early exponent of this view was J. B. Stewart, who in *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* claims that all of Hume's writings constitute a 'highly unified' 'system of thought', and that the later works 'can best be understood as applications and extrapolations of the principles set forth in the *Treatise'* [Stewart 1963, pp. 19, 17]. In *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life,* Donald Livingston announces his intention 'to build a general interpretation of Hume's philosophy which enables us to view his philosophical and historical works as of a piece and Hume as the philosophical man of letters he considered himself to be' [Livingston 1984, p. x]. Livingston's position, like Stewart's, is that the theory of human nature and analysis of the structure of experience elaborated in the *Treatise* is the basis for all of Hume's later writings. Livingston's view is that 'Hume's historical work may be viewed, in part, as the fulfilment of a demand imposed by his conception of philosophy' [p. 2]. In *Reason in History,* Claudia Schmidt argues, in rather similar vein, 'that Hume's philosophy, his study of history, and his contributions to the development of the other academic disciplines are part of a single integrated project', a project that she characterizes as 'a constructive study of human cognition in its historical context' [Schmidt 2003, p. 6]. This way of reading Hume has become orthodox enough to be endorsed in the textbook literature. Thus the Introduction to *The Cambridge*

Companion to Hume informs the reader that 'In a number of respects, Hume's *Essays* and his *History of England* constitute *continuations* of his earliest work. They are, of course, further manifestations of his attempt to extend the experimental method into moral subjects. They are also further manifestations of his attempt to gain understanding by means of an examination of origins or beginnings' [Norton 2009, p. 30]. In a chapter in the *Blackwell Guide to Hume's* '*Treatise*' it is said that 'There is a unity to Hume's writings, from his philosophical writings to his *Histories* and *Essays* and other works' [Robison 2006, p. 26], a unity which consists principally in the way in which the causal analysis of human reasoning and feeling developed in the *Treatise* is deployed in the later works. 'What unifies Hume's works', the chapter concludes, 'is a demonstration, as it were, of how human understanding is possible, through causal analysis, over whatever is in the world' [p. 38].

I believe that it is no more true that Hume's writings constitute a unified system of thought or a single integrated project than that Hume abandoned philosophy for the pursuit of fame and money. Two aspects, at least of the current orthodoxy, seem to me highly questionable. The first is that the right way to approach Hume's intellectual development is to try to see his writings as being all 'of a piece'. It is, I think, very far from obvious that it is a constraint on a successful account of Hume's intellectual development taken as a whole that it be able to show Hume to have been engaged in a single project from the *Treatise* to the *History of England.* It is certainly doubtful whether there is reason to imagine the young Hume of the 1720s and 1730s formulating a set of ambitions that he spent the rest of his life attempting to realise. He certainly had extravagant ambitions when young, but there is no very good reason to assume that he was still guided by those ambitions in later life. Nor is it plain that each of Hume's works was, as it were, an answer to a question posed by its immediate predecessor, as if there is some kind of internal logic to his

development, so that, for example, political writing grew naturally out of the *Treatise*, an interest in political economy out of the *Essays, Moral and Political*, and a history of England out of the *Political Discourses*. The very idea of Hume as a systematic thinker and writer seems to me unmotivated. It seems to me more plausible to see Hume as having been from the first a man with a large number of different interests, a man who read constantly and widely and carefully, and who wrote and published as and when he believed that circumstances would enable him to put his reading and reflection to some use. After the *Treatise*, Hume usually published, revised, cut, and added in response to more or less determinate sets of circumstances, circumstances usually, but not only, political in character. He was in no sense a writer cut off from his world, filling out the details of a preconceived plan of speculative literary endeavour. He made additions to the *Essays* in 1748 as, in part, a response to the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. *Four Dissertations* was intended to speak to the religious and cultural situation in Edinburgh in the mid-1750s. Hume began *The History of England* not knowing how it would develop: not knowing even whether it would be a history of *England*, as it turned out to be, or a history of *Great Britain*, as the first two volumes were originally titled. And the significance of the History changed with changing political circumstances: what in 1754 was primarily an assault on the confusions of popular Whiggism was by 1770 a corrective to the radicalism of John Wilkes and his supporters.

The second questionable assumption obvious in the current orthodoxy concerns how we might, as Livingston puts it, see 'Hume as the philosophical man of letters he considered himself to be'. The assumption is that Hume was a 'philosophical man of letters' just to the extent that, in his various writings, he can be shown to have been continuing with or extending or filling out the project of the *Treatise*. It is assumed, in other words, that the essence of Hume's 'philosophy' is contained in his first book; and that he remained a philosopher thereafter insofar as he maintained his attachment to the ideas and

arguments of that book, or insofar as his later works deepen or redirect or reformulate those ideas and arguments. What is 'philosophical' in Hume's political, economic, and historical writings, this is to say, is to be defined and understood exclusively in terms of continuities with the *Treatise*. I think that this assumption betrays a view of the nature of philosophy just as anachronistic and parochial as that of T. H Green and T. H. Grose. Green declared philosophy to be 'a progressive effort towards a fully-articulated conception of the world as rational'. It is hard to think of an idea of philosophy more perfectly opposed to Hume's, and it is not surprising that Green found it impossible to make sense of Hume continuing to be a philosopher while Hume wrote as he did on morals, politics, economics, and history. Few, in all likelihood, share Green's definition of philosophy today. But we do, for the most part, share with Green an understanding of philosophy as an academic discipline different and distinct from other academic disciplines, and we find in the *Treatise* a set of concerns that fall under the remit of the discipline of philosophy as we currently practise it in academic contexts. This makes it understandable that we might assume that to take Hume to be a philosopher in his morals, politics, economics, and history must be to take him to be continuing with questions raised in the *Treatise*. The assumption is not obviously false, but it does give a somewhat premature answer to the question of whether philosophy in the eighteenth century might not have differed in significant respects from philosophy as it is presently done in the university world.

The truth, it seems to me, is that we have barely begun when it comes to considering what answer should be given to this question. In general, philosophy has proved rather bad at historicizing itself, at considering how its nature and characteristic goals and methods might have changed over the centuries. Philosophers are still comfortable with the idea, criticized vigorously but unsuccessfully by Collingwood in his autobiography, that their subject is constituted by a set of timeless problems that it is their business, and only their

business, to provide solutions to. It is still possible for a philosopher working today to imagine herself, in so far as she is dealing with one or other of those problems, to be in dialogue with a philosopher who lived two hundred, or even two thousand, years ago. This is not the occasion, needless to say, to interrogate philosophy's self-conception – especially in light of the fact that this talk is a part of a series called 'Dialogues with Hume'. Instead I want to consider, all too cursorily, the question of what Hume and Hume's readers understood to be the character of the more important of the texts that he published after the *Treatise:* I shall limit myself to the *Essays, Moral and Political,* the *Political Discourses,* and the *History of England.* In various ways each of these three texts represented themselves, and were read as, exercises in philosophical reasoning and writing. And, when one looks closely at these modes of self-presentation and these ways of reading, it does not seem as though what made Hume and his readers think of them as being philosophical had very much to do with continuities with the project of the *Treatise.* What they suggest, rather, is that an account of the nature of philosophizing in eighteenth-century Britain might begin with the idea of philosophy as, to put it very approximately, a style of thinking and writing, not a subject matter but instead *a way of approaching* a subject-matter, whether that subject-matter was religion or trade, politics or botany, theology or chemistry. To write as a philosopher in this time and place was, perhaps, in the first instance, to adopt a particular tone of voice, and to assume a distinctive persona or role in the contested and chaotic world of eighteenth-century letters.

– 3 –

Hume's essays are very often structured by a binary opposition with respect to which Hume himself pointedly refuses to take sides. Thus in 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' Hume carefully sets up an opposition between the sharply contrasting mindsets of the Catholic

and the extreme Protestant, and then fails to come to any overall decision as to the respective merits of each. In 'Of the Dignity of Human Nature' Hume mediates between those who exaggerate the virtues and capacities of human beings and those who 'insist upon the blind Sides of human Nature, and can discover nothing, except Vanity, in which Man surpasses the other Animals' [Hume 1741, p. 162]. In 'Of Eloquence', Hume addresses what is in effect the dispute between 'the Ancients' and 'the Modems' about whether or not history since the decline of Rome has been a story of decline or improvement. Hume's authorial voice in his essays is one of studied balance and impartiality, and nowhere more so than in the treatments of political topics which dominate the volume published in 1741. In these essays, the governing binary opposition is the party conflict that had shaped British politics since the ascendancy of Robert Walpole the position of 'prime minister' in 1722: the conflict between the 'Court' party that backed Walpole's administration, and the 'Country' opposition. In the Advertisement to the *Essays* Hume drew attention to his 'Moderation and Impartiality in [his] Method of handling POLITICAL SUBJECTS'. He said that he had endeavoured as far as possible to 'repress' what he termed 'PARTY-RAGE' – meaning, presumably, that he had tried to check it in his readers, rather than in himself. And he hoped that this project would be acceptable to 'the moderate', as distinct from 'the Bigots', of both parties [Hume 1741, pp. iv-v]. Hume's goal was, in effect, to show the moderate members of the two parties that the disputes that divided them were not as intractable as they imagined them to be. It is not quite right to say that Hume was of neither party. It is better to say that, to an extent, Hume was of both. In an essay written in the late 1750s Hume welcomed signs of a strengthening 'coalition of parties'. 'There is not a more effectual method of promoting so good an end', he wrote, 'than to prevent all unreasonable insult and triumph of one party over the other, to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in disputes, to persuade each other that its antagonist

may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame which we bestow on each side' [Hume 1760, vol. 2, p. 324]. Hume's political essays present themselves as 'philosophical' just in so far as their purpose was, precisely, to encourage moderate opinions, and to lower the political temperature.

There was already a large body of political writing opposed to the very idea of political 'parties', or 'factions', but all of it was written from the point of view of one party or other, and was intended to show that the other party was venal to the point of corruption, or unpatriotic to the point of sedition. A further aspect of what Duncan Forbes called Hume's 'philosophical politics' [cf. Forbes 1975] was to explain the origins of the Court-Country divide, and to show that the existence of a party divide was not, as both parties liked to claim, albeit for different reasons, a betrayal of the political settlement reached in the wake of the 1688 revolution, but rather an inevitable feature of 'mixed' constitution in which power was balanced between the House of Commons and the Crown. There was, in other words, nothing wrong with party politics as such: it was not a species of treason to define oneself as being part of the 'opposition' to His Majesty's government; it was not a species of corruption to define oneself as being both a member of the House of Commons and of the party of the King. Hume sought to make it clear that tension between the interests of the Commons and the Crown was built into British politics. Given its relative poverty, the Crown was bound to use all means at its disposal, and the Civil List most obviously, as a means of developing a power base in the Commons. This was bound to cause resentment among those who, for whatever reason, did not benefit in the process. The disputes that resulted were, in effect, nothing other than disputes between the two fundamental principles of British politics: authority, as represented by the monarchy, and liberty, as represented by the Commons. And it was a dangerous misconception, according to Hume, to think that either principle, and either party, might have

right entirely on its side. What was necessary, rather, was to find a workable balance between the two. The real question was, *how much* influence the crown could have before liberty was endangered, and this was – and could only be – a question of degree. So, for example, in the essay 'Of the Independency of Parliament', Hume notes that 'Instead of asserting absolutely, that the Dependence of Parliament, in every Degree, is an Infringement of *British* Liberty, the Country-Party would have done better to have made some Concessions to their Adversaries, and to have only examined what was the proper Degree of this Dependence, beyond which it became dangerous to Liberty'. Once such a concession was made, 'Declamation' would have to come to an end, to be replaced by 'a serious calm Enquiry into the proper degrees of Court-Influence' [Hume 1741, p. 90]. Again, the Humean goal is calmness, an end to polemic and extremism, and sober and clear-headed moves toward compromise on both sides.

Nowhere is the aspiration to a philosophical perspective upon political questions clearer than in Burne's essay 'Of the Protestant Succession', written for the 1748 edition of the *Essays* but only published in the *Political Discourses* in 1752. Here the binary opposition at issue is the most inflammatory question of the age: the question of whether it was right that the English and Scottish successions were settled on the House of Hanover after the death of Queen Anne. To his friend Lord Karnes, Hume wrote that he treated the question of the succession 'as coolly and indifferently, as I would the dispute betwixt Caesar and Pompey. The conclusion shows me a Whig, but a very sceptical one' [Hume 1932, vol. 1, p. 111]. The scepticism lay in Burne's refusal to subscribe to any claims to the effect that the claim to the British throne of the (Protestant) House of Hanover was given legitimacy by a contractual agreement between the people and their government. Burne's Whiggism, and his preference for George II over the Old Pretender, was strictly 'political', motivated solely by a careful assessment of the interests of the nation taken as a whole. And even

there he was sceptical, fully aware of the potential disadvantages to Britain of the foreign dominions of a German sovereign, and admitting the instability, in the form of plots and conspiracies and actual rebellions, that was bound to be consequent upon a contested title to the throne. There was, in addition, a more insidious and dangerous weakness attendant on a 'precarious establishment' such as that of the Hanoverians. In order to give itself a strength and stability that it would otherwise have lacked, the Hanoverian state had got into the habit of mortgaging its finances and of never paying off its debts. A recalled Stuart king would feel more secure, because a hereditary claim was by its nature more secure, at least in the eyes of the people at large, than a claim derived from a decision of parliament. And because he felt more secure, he would borrow less. He would be willing to arm his subjects, which no prince with a disputed title would dare to do, and therefore defence of the realm would be less costly. Even so, Hume argued, the balance of considerations spoke in favour of the settlement of 1688. The most important factor mitigating against the Stuart claim was their Catholicism. But there was also the fact that the settlement of the crown on the house of Hanover had actually taken place. It could only be undone by means of civil war and rebellion; and even were such a rebellion successful, the title to the throne would remain disputed from the other side. Arguments made in the *Treatise* concerning the basis of the virtue of allegiance are clearly visible in the background of this essay, but they are not what makes its treatment of the succession question 'philosophical'. The philosophy, rather, lies in the refusal to answer the question using anything other than pragmatic, and intimately related, considerations of the national interest and the existing state of public opinion.

In the *Political Discourses*, further definition was given to Hume's analysis of the politics of his age. Hume did not have party politics at the front of his mind as he wrote his essays on economics. His concern was with modern politics considered from another angle: that is, with

a set of almost universal misconceptions about the functioning of the economy, and about the nature of the relationship between the economy and political power, where 'political power' meant Britain's standing among the other nations of Europe. At the beginning of the first discourse, 'Of Commerce', Hume lays it down as a maxim that ''tis the chief business of philosophers to regard the general course of things' [Hume 1752, p. 3]. The bulk of mankind concern themselves rather with particulars: 'They cannot enlarge their view to those universal propositions, which comprehend under them an infinite number of individuals, and include a whole science in a single theorem' [pp. 2-3]. It is politicians, understood in a wide, eighteenth-century sense to include all of those who interested themselves in politics, that Hume intends as his audience in the *Discourses*. For generality should be their concern as well, 'especially in the domestic government of the state, where the public good, which is, or ought to be their object, depends on the concurrence of a multitude of cases; not, as in foreign politics, upon accidents, and chances, and the caprices of a few persons' [p. 3]. The fact was that very few had given proper attention to the working of a modern commercial economy, and to the connections between commerce and the health of the nation. Most were victims of age-old prejudices concerning the implications of commerce for virtue and martial vigour. To them, the axioms of modern political economy were at best paradoxes, and at worst obviously ridiculous. Hume declared himself willing to 'submit to the ridicule sometimes, in this age, attach'd to the character of a philosopher' [p. 45]. And he set out to show that commerce strengthens a country, rather than weakens it; that 'the ages of refinement and luxury are both the happiest and most virtuous'; that an increase in the supply of money is not the same thing as an increase in wealth; that the cause of low interest rates is not a large supply of money; that there is nothing dangerous in the export of a staple such as corn; and so on.

As in other places in Hume's writings, the job of the philosopher

in the *Political Discourses* was to show that a proposition could be both paradoxical and true. The principal paradox that Hume sought to vindicate was that Britain, so long as the right political-economic policies were in place, need not worry about the increasing prosperity of its neighbours. Trade and commerce were not a zero-sum game. On the contrary, each country stood to benefit from the wealth of the countries around it. Making this clear was Hume's main concern in 'Of the Jealousy of Trade', added to the *Political Discourses* in 1760. The truth was 'that the increase of riches and commerce in any one nation, instead of hurting, commonly promotes the riches and commerce of all its neighbours; and that a state can scarcely carry its trade and industry very far, where all the surrounding states are buried in ignorance, sloth, and barbarism' [Hume 1760, vol. 2, p. 105]. Given that there was a connection between increases in riches and commerce and increases in a country's power (principally, but not only, as an effect of the larger army and navy it was able to pay for), trade and commerce had, at the very least, the potential to effect a fundamental alteration of how a balance of power among the states of Europe could be achieved. In this way Humean 'philosophy' sought to correct the brutely militaristic thinking of earlier ages. In a remarkable passage, Hume concluded 'Of the Jealousy of Trade' by declaring 'that not only as a man, but as a British subject, I pray for the flourishing commerce of Germany, Spain, Italy, and even France' [p. 110]. France was, as it always had been, the crux of the matter. It was France more than any other nation that was generally supposed to pose the threat of 'universal monarchy'. Hume was prepared to acknowledge that in the last three of the 'general wars' waged in Europe to counter France's power, 'Britain has stood foremost in the glorious struggle; and she still maintains her station, as guardian of the general liberties of *Europe,* and patron of mankind' [Hume 1752, p. 110]. But, still, the ways the wars were waged were too much determined by passion, and too little by reason. Once engaged with France, Britain's politicians

did not know when to stop. Hume was even prepared to go so far as to challenge the standard contrast of British prosperity with French poverty, and to argue that Britain would profit from following France's economic policies in some respects. He admired France's unwillingness to place confidence in paper money, and the general clamp-down on the means of financial speculation that had followed the collapse of John Law's Mississippi Company in 1720.

The philosophical political economist is thus prepared to show to be true what according to common sense must be false. But he is also prepared to vindicate common sense at the expense of what he takes to be fashionable, and dangerous, nonsense. We have already seen that in his discussion of the Protestant succession Hume took the Hanoverian indifference to national indebtedness – an indifference assiduously cultivated by Walpole – as something which counted in favour of the Stuart cause. In the discourse 'Of Public Credit', Hume explained exactly why he rejected what he refers to as 'the new paradox that public encumbrances are, of themselves, advantageous, independent of any necessity of contracting them; and that any state, even tho' it was not prest by a foreign enemy, cou'd not possibly have embrac'd a wiser expedient for promoting commerce and riches, than to create funds and debts and taxes, without limitation' [Hume 1752, p. 126]. Hume pointed out that an economy fuelled by debt and speculation unbalances a country by concentrating people and wealth in the capital; that such an economy is bound to be subject to inflation, because paper money is (so Hume had argued in 'Of Money') inevitably inflationary, and stocks and bonds are a kind of paper money; that the taxes needed to pay interest on bonds are a check upon industry, increase the price of labour, and (in an age when most taxes were taxes on consumption) oppress the poor; that bonds give foreigners a potentially dangerous stake in the national funds; and that those who live by speculation and interest on their investments are 'useless and inactive'. Furthermore, a state that acquires debts cannot but

be a state which weakens itself in comparison with other states. The whole question of national debt, Hume claimed, had yet to be properly addressed because of the extent to which thinking about the issue was clouded by 'loose reasonings and specious comparisons'. It was said, for example, that where a nation's own people were the main purchasers of its bonds, all that was happening was something like a person transferring money from his right hand to his left. Nothing, in other words, was lost. And yet at the same time, nonsensically if nothing really was lost, everyone agreed that there were limits to how large the national debt should become [Hume 1752, pp. 132-133]. It was in connection with the issue of public debt that Hume several times betrayed a fear that there were pressing problems in British politics that had to be settled if the country was to retain its liberty. His worries became acute in the 1760s. In a 1764 revision of 'Of Public Credit', Hume saw only two possible futures for a debt-ridden British state: either the state would voluntarily default on its debts, in the process re-establishing the spirit of absolutism into domestic politics; or the state would choose to act in the interests of its creditors to the detriment of its international obligations and interests, perhaps refusing to involve itself in wars necessary to containing the power of France, and thereby in the end bringing about British subjection to foreign power.

I move now from the *Political Discourses* to the *History of England.* From the outset Hume's History was characterized and praised as 'philosophical', and I shall briefly consider three things that this meant. In the first instance, philosophical history in the eighteenth century was what Voltaire had called 'general history' – history which sought to describe the 'manners' and 'spirit' of nations, and which refused to content itself with the dates and deeds of kings. 'Have there been none but princes on the earth?' Voltaire asked in the Introduction to the *Essai sur l'Histoire Générale et sur les Moeurs,* '[a]nd must almost all the inventors of arts be unknown, while we have

chronological accounts of such numbers of men, who have done a great deal of mischief, or at least have been of very little service to society?' [Voltaire 1754-1757, vol. 1, p. 2]. Voltaire served notice that he would sometimes interrupt his narrative in order to 'trace back the distant source of an art, an important custom, of a law, or a revolution' [vol. 1, p. 3]. Of course, Hume's *History* concerned itself first and foremost with kings and queens, but, in long asides that would eventually become long endnotes, Hume sought to put the events he recounted in a larger cultural context, in order, presumably, to make plausible the general thesis that the doings of royalty and nobility were in fact only of limited use in explaining England's progress toward liberty. It is in the spirit of Voltairean 'general history' that Hume made no apology, at the end of his account of the reign of James I, 'for departing a little from historical style' in order to 'take a survey of the state of the kingdom, with regard to government, manners, arms, trade, learning', on the grounds that '[w]here a just notion is not formed of these particulars, history can be very little instructive, and often will not be intelligible' [Hume 1754, p. 116]. Tobias Smollett, himself an author of a history of England, remarked that in Hume 'we find an attempt to comprehend all the objects of history, not only the great and interesting transactions of each reign, with whatever may characterize the persons engaged in public life, or delineate the state of the constitution in different periods; but, in order to point out the progress of the nation in political, commercial, or literary improvements, the regulations which relate to police, commerce, or the revenue, are minutely observed, and the essays of genius are considered'. Smollett continued that 'we must, upon the whole, applaud the skill with which our author has involved the reflections of a philosophical historian in the detail of his facts, in a manner which throws a light upon every subject, without sensibly interrupting the course of narration' [Smollett 2003 (1759), pp. 184-185].

Hume's *History* was philosophical also in that it was a major

contribution to the development of what, following Duncan Forbes, we can call 'scientific' as distinct from 'vulgar' Whiggism [Forbes 1975, eh. 5]. The goals here were to come to a proper understanding of the much-vaunted English system of liberty, and to show that this system was *modern.* The revolution of 1688 had brought English liberty into existence: it had not, as the Whigs liked to believe, merely restored liberties that Englishmen had possessed by right for centuries, perhaps since before the time of the Normans. Showing that this was so involved making it clear that it was in the Tudor period, and not in early decades of the seventeenth century, that the power of the crown had begun to over-reach itself because of the extent to which the feudal order had already fallen apart. There was no basis, in other words, for the standard Whig contrast between the freedoms of Tudor England and the tyrannical pretensions of the Stuarts. It also involved demonstrating that those very tyrannical pretensions had been consistently overstated. In the first instalment of the *History* to be published, Hume set out to show that James I and Charles I were largely well-meaning men completely out of their depth, politically speaking, because they were unaware of the extent to which their power depended upon the good will (which was to say chiefly, the money) of the House of Commons. As Hume put it, it was the fate of the Stuarts to govern at a period when the source of royal authority inherent in 'the antient constitution' was much diminished, and before the revenues possessed by the crown 'in our present constitution' had started to flow. 'Without a regular and fixed foundation,' Hume wrote, 'the throne continually tottered; and the prince sat upon it anxiously and precariously'. 'The philosophy of government,' he explained, 'accompanying a narration of its revolutions, may render history more intelligible as well as instructive. And nothing will tend more to bate the acrimony of party-disputes, than to show men, that those events which they impute to their adversaries as the deepest crimes, were the natural, if not the necessary result of the situation in which the nation was placed, during any period' [Hume 1754, p. 245].

It was a symptom of the very disease Hume was trying to cure that his *History* seemed to many people the work not of a Whig but of a Tory.

As in the *Essays,* then, Hume in the *History* adopted a studied and surely intentionally provocative even-handedness in his judgments. Part of being a 'scientific Whig', for Hume at least, was to refuse to play by the rules of ordinary Whig politics: the Stuarts were not all bad, the Tudors were very far from all good, and so on. It is sometimes suggested that the one aspect of British history with regard to which Hume's moderation and impartiality deserted him is the role played by religion in political affairs. Hume, it is said, could not restrain himself from putting the worst possible construction upon the motives and conduct of men and women of religion. I don't think this is true. What is true is that Hume was completely even-handed when it comes to the apportioning of blame to Protestants and Catholics. He failed to see the coming of the Reformation to England and Scotland as a manifestation of the spirit of liberty, and clearly had no sympathy whatsoever for Knox in Scotland and Cranmer in England. He was just as unsympathetic in his portraits of the Catholics Thomas Beckett, Mary Stuart, and Thomas More. But it is no more the case in the *History* than elsewhere in Hume's works that 'philosophy' is by definition hostile to religion. Philosophical history treats religion as one, very important, aspect of political and social life. Philosophical history, in other words, is philosophical partly in the sense that it refuses to be providentialist history. But, at least in Hume's hands, it does not deny or seek to downplay the importance of religion to making sense of historical change, and according to Hume it was to be admitted that, even though from the beginning Protestantism was a source of disorder and conflict, still, that disorder and conflict was a vital motor of the seventeenth century's progress toward the 1688 revolution. The Independents of the 1640s were, on Hume's account, fanatics who would not be satisfied by anything less than the execution of Charles I. Hume described the Independents, along with the Puritans, as authoritarian hypocrites who used religion as a mask for their own appetite for power. Even so, the

Glorious Revolution, when it came, was in a real sense a consequence, albeit an unintended one, of the actions of such extremists.

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When, in the first section of what became *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,* Hume distinguished between 'the different species of philosophy', he had two species in mind: one which appeals to taste and the sentiments and which tries to make a difference to how we conduct ourselves in society, and another which 'treat[s] Man rather as a reasonable than an active Being, and endeavour[s] to form his Understanding more than cultivate his Manners' [Hume 1748, pp. 1-2]. Hume went on to suggest that this distinction is a false one, and that it is possible for a philosopher to hope both to form understanding and to cultivate manners. I think that this is precisely what Hume set out to do in his post-*Treatise* writings, and in this talk I have made some suggestions as to how he thought of himself as doing this. Perhaps in the *Treatise* Hume devoted himself to an 'anatomical' philosophy that had no practical aspirations. But we should not conclude that for Hume philosophy as such was anatomical and analytical, and that everything else was mere pious moralizing. Hume was no moralizer, and he remained, as Hutcheson appears to have said of his performance in Book Three of the *Treatise,* somewhat lacking in warmth for the cause of virtue. It is not the case, however, that for Hume the only practical role philosophy could play was that of persuading people to be more virtuous. There was also the question of the role that philosophy could play in the political domain. In politics, as Hume remarked in his essay 'Of the Independency of Parliament', 'every man ought to be supposed a Knave, and to have no other End, in all his Actions, than private Interest' [Hume 1741, p. 84]. Men (and women) need to be educated as to the difference between real and merely apparent interests, however, and that, I think, is the task Hume

set himself after the *Treatise.* None of the texts I have considered here – the *Essays, Moral and Political,* the *Political Discourses*, and the *History of England* – are intelligible only when considered in relation to the *Treatise*. The *Treatise*, in fact, contributes very little, perhaps nothing, to a proper understanding of these texts. To say this, though, is not to say that these texts are not intended as philosophical treatments of their topics. In the first *Enquiry* Hume characterized 'the Genius of Philosophy' as 'a Spirit of Accuracy'. That spirit, he said, carries 'every Art and Profession, even those which most concern Life or Action ... nearer their Perfection, and renders them more subservient to the Interests of Society' [Hume 1748, p. 9].

I am, it will be apparent, in fact endorsing one aspect of the nineteenth-century way of reading Hume. I believe that it is to a significant extent true that Hume's intellectual biography can be divided into two phases: one phase comprising the *Treatise*, and possibly also (though this is far from obvious) its recastings in the forms of two 'enquiries' and one 'dissertation', and another phase comprising the *Essays*, the *Political Discourses*, and the *History*. For present purposes, I must leave to one side the question of where this distinction between phases leaves the *Dialogues* and the 'Natural History of Religion'. I don't think, though, that the transition from one phase to the other was a transition from philosophy to something else. I think that it is better understood in terms of a transition from one kind of philosophy to another. In what for convenience's sake we can call the first phase – the phase of the *Treatise* – Hume was writing, with all of the arrogance of youth, for a select group of British and European men of letters, brimful of enthusiasm for what he had found in Bayle and Mandeville and probably other sceptical Epicureans besides, eager to show how the philosophies of Shaftesbury, Butler, and Hutcheson had to be altered and improved. In the second phase, which in fact had its genesis in the same years as did the first phase, Hume wrote for a different audience, in a different language, on different questions. The impetus behind this second phase was not, as

it is often said to be, an overwhelming desire to make up for the failure of the *Treatise* to have its desired effect. Hume did not spend the rest of his life trying to compensate for having failed to become a philosopher. There is simply no evidence to think that this was so. Instead, patiently and very self-consciously, he worked at turning himself into a writer whose insight and impartiality, and poise and detachment, would show him to be a genuinely *philosophical* analyst, perhaps the first genuinely *philosophical* analyst, of the politics of his age.

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